

THE STRAITS TIMES

Sport Badminton's modest giant killer C9



Life S'pore teen debuts invention at CES D3



Top of the News
New Pahang Sultan ascends throne A8

Home
S'pore is hot – and getting hotter B1&2



Home Online travel site Zuci appears to have shut down B3 • Business Singapore to boost agri-tech sector C3

Chinatown lights up for Chinese New Year

Thousands of lanterns illuminated the sky in Chinatown last night as visitors were given a preview of the Chinese New Year light-up. Come Sunday, the 2,688 lanterns will be turned on by Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing. Themed "Celebration of Abundance and Prosperity", this year's festival features lanterns in the shape of a family of pigs, the tallest of which is 12m high. The display will be up until March 6.

ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

SEE HOME B2



Music rules eased for Thaipusam procession

The authorities have softened the rules on music at the upcoming Thaipusam procession.

For the first time since live music was banned in 1973, devotees can use selected percussion instruments. They can play their music from 7am – an hour earlier than last year – to 10.30pm. There will also be 35 points along the route where music is transmitted over broadcast systems, 12 more than last year.

Some 20,000 people are expected to attend the event on Sunday and Monday.

SEE TOP OF THE NEWS A8

MediShield Life caps to be reviewed more regularly

The Health Ministry will tweak healthcare financing to ensure it remains affordable for subsidised patients. This includes more frequent, three-yearly reviews on MediShield Life caps so they reflect healthcare inflation. It will also keep a close watch on public healthcare costs.

Senior Minister of State for Health Edwin Tong told Parliament yesterday that the need to monitor costs and charges in public healthcare is particularly important. He was addressing concerns that MediShield Life is not adequately protecting patients against large subsidised bills.

SEE TOP OF THE NEWS A5

IHiS, SingHealth fined \$1m; new cyber security steps taken

Healthcare sector looking at tiered Net access to minimise risks in the wake of data breach

Irene Tham
Senior Tech Correspondent

The fallout from the SingHealth data breach continues to reverberate across the healthcare sector, with Singapore's privacy watchdog dishing out hefty fines totalling \$1 million against those responsible for the lapse and a slew of cyber security measures being rolled out to safeguard critical systems.

Updating Parliament yesterday on the heels of a detailed report by

mission (PDPC) had found both SingHealth and its IT vendor Integrated Health Information Systems (IHiS) guilty of failing to secure patient data. The cyber attack had compromised the personal information of 1.5 million patients, including Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

The COI had noted that SingHealth had delegated its cyber security operations entirely to IHiS and, given the severity of the lapses, the PDPC imposed its largest-ever fine of \$750,000 on the technology vendor.

But it stressed that, as the owner of the patient data system, SingHealth also had a responsibility for the breach, and fined it

\$250,000 – its second-biggest fine to date.

"Even if organisations delegate work to vendors, organisations as data controllers must ultimately take responsibility for the personal data that they have collected from their customers," said the PDPC.

IHiS had disclosed earlier that it had fired two of its employees who were found to be negligent and imposed financial penalties on five members of its senior management team, including its chief executive.

Yesterday, Mr Gan said that even though the COI had not identified lapses among specific individuals within SingHealth, the healthcare cluster accepted its responsibility for the breach. "The SingHealth se-

nior leadership has accepted a financial penalty," he said.

Mr Iswaran said that the measures recommended by the COI would help Singapore guard against malicious cyber activities, including from international attackers.

"A cyber attack of the scale and sophistication that was launched against SingHealth could also be mounted on any of our major IT systems, threatening the safety and security of Singapore and Singaporeans," he said.

To guard against it, there will be increased automation of the roll-out of software patches, and audits and drills will be intensified. Internet surfing separation and the use of a virtual browser are also in the works for the healthcare sector.

Elaborating on this, Mr Gan said that while temporary Internet surfing separation had been implemented across the public healthcare sector in the wake of the attack, it had posed challenges in areas such as emergency care and tele-consultations.

MOH was now looking at more long-term solutions. It was studying a tiered model of Internet access, in which some job roles might

not need it, while for others, it could be managed through the use of separate devices with and without Internet surfing abilities.

In cases where staff like clinicians need access to the Internet and intranet on the same device, MOH is experimenting with using virtual browsers, which allow access to the Internet through strictly controlled client servers.

"This was not the first instances where we were targeted, and it will not be the last," said Mr Iswaran.

He added: "We cannot let incidents like this derail our Smart Nation initiatives that can enhance our economic competitiveness and deliver better public services."

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SEE TOP OF THE NEWS A4

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10 must-reads for today

1 German airport strikes

Hundreds of flights were cancelled at eight German airports yesterday, including at the nation's busiest travel hub Frankfurt, as security staff walked off the job amid an escalating pay dispute. At least 220,000 travellers will be hit by cancellations and delays, the ADV airport association said.

WORLD A14



A security worker holding a sign depicting €20 during a strike at Frankfurt Airport yesterday. PHOTO: DPA

2 Big fines over data breach

Minister-in-charge of Cyber Security S. Iswaran and Minister for Health Gan Kim Yong told Parliament that the Personal Data Protection Commission had fined both SingHealth and its IT vendor for failing to secure patient data in a massive breach of medical records last year. The ministers said they fully accepted a report by the Committee of Inquiry looking into the breach.

TOP OF THE NEWS A1

4 Delay a blow to Iskandar?

The postponement of Monday's bilateral meeting between Singapore and Malaysia on Johor's most important economic zone comes at an inopportune time for the southern state. As Singapore is Iskandar's second-largest foreign investor, this could be a significant blow to the zone.

WORLD A9

5 Poly grads do better in 2018

Fresh polytechnic graduates last year did better than their seniors in employment. The latest survey shows more found employment within six months, compared with the 2017 cohort. The median monthly salary rose from \$2,235 in 2017 to \$2,350 last year.

TOP OF THE NEWS A8

5 Picking World Bank chief

For too long, realpolitik and US strategic interests have dominated who gets the top job at the World Bank. It is time to have a real contest rather than a coronation, says associate editor Vikram Khanna (below).

OPINION A17

6 Bills to dissolve AVA

Two Bills tabled in Parliament yesterday will dissolve the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority and divide its functions between the National Parks Board (NParks) and a new agency, the Singapore Food Agency (SFA).

NParks will oversee plant and animal-related matters, and SFA will boost food safety.

HOME B4

7 Why maids seek help

The main reasons domestic workers seek help are overwork, verbal abuse and salary matters, said the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) and a Hong Kong-based anti-trafficking group. Between April 2017 and last March, Home received 2,832 complaints and provided shelter to more than 800 foreign maids.

HOME B6

8 Bills to dissolve AVA

Two Bills tabled in Parliament yesterday will dissolve the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority and divide its functions between the National Parks Board (NParks) and a new agency, the Singapore Food Agency (SFA).

NParks will oversee plant and animal-related matters, and SFA will boost food safety.

HOME B4



Paul Casey looking at the trophy ahead of the SMBC Singapore Open in Sentosa yesterday. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

9 Golf duo not over the hill

While golf is now a young man's game, veterans Sergio Garcia and Paul Casey, in town for the SMBC Singapore Open, still feel they can give the others a run for their money.

For title holder Garcia, it is about taking care of his body more, while Casey said he is still hungry putting in the practice.

SPORT C8

10 Actor Chris Pratt engaged

Photos first turned up in tabloids last summer of Jurassic World star Chris Pratt and Katherine Schwarzenegger, the daughter of former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and journalist Maria Shriver. Now, the author is set to have a permanent place in his heart after they got engaged following a whirlwind romance.

LIFE D10

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VIDEO

Rising badminton star
Singaporean shuttler Loh Kean Yew, 21, beat Chinese great Lin Dan at a badminton tournament in Bangkok recently. Here are some facts about the rising star.

<http://str.sg/keanyew>



WEB SPECIAL

Brexit timeline

From the shock Brexit referendum result in 2016 to yesterday's momentous vote on British Prime Minister Theresa May's divorce deal with the European Union, here are the milestones.

<http://str.sg/brexitime>

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Is this exhibition suitable for me?

The exhibition is suitable for all students in Singapore who are considering overseas education. You can come to explore your options or simply submit applications to multiple institutions in one go. There are scholarships for Polytechnic students there may be 1-2 year credit exemptions.

A-Level or Polytechnic students -> Come to meet top universities who accept A-Level and Diploma. Compare your options! For Polytechnic students there may be 1-2 year credit exemptions.

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Do more at one go with our new upsized 73L convection oven. Whether it's baking Chinese New Year goodies, or cooking for a house party, the extra space goes a long way. What's more, its sleek minimalist design makes it a great centerpiece for any kitchen.



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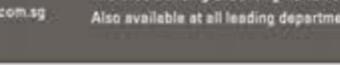
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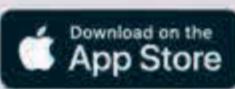
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11 critical sectors to beef up cyber security

More security audits, drills in new cyber defence model in response to COI recommendations

Irene Tham
Senior Tech Correspondent



BOOSTING DEFENCES

The recommended measures will help us defend ourselves better against malicious cyber activities, including from international attackers. This was not the first instance where we were targeted, and it will not be the last.

“

MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF CYBER SECURITY S. ISWARAN

Singapore will intensify the use of technology to automate cyber security tasks such as the roll-out of software patches.

Also, more security audits and drills will be carried out to sharpen public officers' readiness to respond to cyber incidents.

These new measures to shore up the cyber security of public sector systems were disclosed by Minister-in-charge of Cyber Security S. Iswaran in Parliament yesterday.

This new model of cyber defence will be implemented across 11 critical information infrastructure sectors, including healthcare, energy, telecommunications and transport.

The new approach is a response to the recommendations of a high-level Committee of Inquiry (COI) that investigated the cyber attack on SingHealth, Singapore's largest cluster of healthcare institutions. Mr Iswaran said its findings and recommendations gave "added impetus" to the ongoing efforts of the Smart Nation and Digital Government Group (SNDGG) to improve the cyber security of government systems.

"In particular, the findings reaffirmed the 'defence-in-depth' approach the public sector had adopted towards cyber security."

He added: "The public sector will also continue to strengthen our defences on all fronts – people, process, technology and partnerships, as informed by the COI recommendations."

The recommendations were unveiled last week in a public report that recounted the events that led to June's cyber attack that compromised the personal information of 1.5 million patients, including

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. On the technical front, SNDGG will look at improving the architecture of government systems to allow more extensive monitoring and detection of abnormal activities. It will also continue to introduce measures to better detect and respond to intrusions, and monitor critical databases.

Acknowledging that the Government cannot fortify its cyber security alone, he said it will enlist the help of the larger cyber security community, including ethical hackers.

The Cyber Security Agency of Singapore will oversee and follow up on how the COI recommendations will be carried out in the 11 sectors.

Said Mr Iswaran, who is also Minister for Communications and Information: "The recommended measures will help us defend ourselves better against malicious cyber activities, including from international attackers. This was not the first instance where we were targeted, and it will not be the last."

Mr Vikram Nair (Sembawang GRC) and Mr Cedric Foo (Pioneer) asked about the hackers' identity.

Mr Foo, chairman of the Government Parliamentary Committee for Communications and Information, said: "How about the person who actually broke into the house? There seems to be a vacuum as far as the sense of justice (goes)."

Replying, Mr Iswaran said: "I don't think we should deduce whether we have a sense of justice to just one specific point – that there is no public attribution of the perpetrator."

Citing moves that the Government made in the spirit of transparency, he said Singapore can hold itself up to the best practices and standards. The moves include announcing the cyber attack on July 20 last year, 10 days after it was made known to the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore, and convening a COI and releasing the recommendations and findings.

"I can understand that members have a desire and on behalf of constituents to know this, but I think we have to exercise judgment – what is in our national interest and whether a public attribution serves our best interests. And as I said, we know who the perpetrator is, appropriate action has been taken."

itham@sph.com.sg



The Cyber Security Agency of Singapore will oversee and follow up on how the recommendations of the Committee of Inquiry that investigated the SingHealth attack will be carried out in the 11 sectors.

ST FILE PHOTO

Actions taken

Committee of Inquiry (COI)

- Following the announcement of the breach, Minister for Communications and Information S. Iswaran, who is also Minister-in-charge of Cyber Security, convened a four-member COI to get to the bottom of the attack.
- In a public report issued last Thursday, the COI identified five key factors that led to the breach.
- It also made 16 recommendations to enhance responses to similar incidents, better protect SingHealth's database against similar attacks and reduce the risk of such cyber attacks on public sector IT systems with large databases of personal data.

Government

- The Personal Data Protection Commission (PDPC), Singapore's privacy watchdog, said yesterday that it has fined Integrated Health Information Systems (IHIS) \$750,000 and SingHealth \$250,000 for the data breach.
- Both Mr Iswaran and Minister for Health Gan Kim Yong said in Parliament yesterday that the Government accepts the COI's recommendations.
- Mr Iswaran said more technology will be used to automate cyber security tasks. Security audits and drills will be intensified to sharpen public officers' readiness to respond to cyber security incidents.
- A tiered model of Internet access will be in the works for the healthcare sector, said Mr Gan, should a virtual browser solution being tested prove effective.
- Mr Gan added that mandatory contributions to the National Electronic Health Record (NEHR) system will be deferred.
- The Cyber Security Agency of Singapore has instructed all critical information infrastructure (CII) sectors to strengthen network security. It has also designated all CIIs, and their owners must now comply with obligations under the Cyber Security Act.

Integrated Health Information Systems (IHIS)

- IHIS has outlined measures to strengthen cyber security, including two-factor authentication for local administrators. It is also studying the possibility of using a virtual browser solution.
- Two employees of the public healthcare sector's IT vendor, who were found to be negligent during the data breach, have been fired.
- A "significant financial penalty" has been imposed on five members of its senior management team, including its chief executive, Mr Bruce Liang.

SingHealth

- SingHealth is making changes to enhance its cyber security governance structures and improve management oversight of its critical systems. It will also work with IHIS to upgrade its cyber defence systems.
- The SingHealth senior leadership, including its group chief executive Ivy Ng, has voluntarily accepted a financial penalty.

Hariz Baharudin

Staff may get tiered model of Internet access: Gan Kim Yong

Hariz Baharudin

A tiered model of Internet access will be rolled out for the healthcare sector, should a virtual browser solution that is being tested prove effective, Minister for Health Gan Kim Yong said yesterday.

It could be the best solution for staff whose jobs require access to the Internet and the healthcare group's internal network to be provided on the same device, Mr Gan told Parliament.

But those whose jobs do not need Internet access will continue to remain out of it, he said, citing administrative staff doing back-end tasks.

Likewise, staff who can access the Web via a separate device like a mobile phone, he added.

Mr Gan made these points in a ministerial statement on the actions his ministry will take following the cyber attack on the database of Singapore's largest healthcare cluster, SingHealth.

Hackers stole the data of 1.5 million patients and the outpatient prescription details of 160,000 people, including those of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

The minister said a virtual browser will allow access to the Internet through strictly controlled and monitored client servers, and his ministry had been experimenting with the solution before the cyber attack.

"If we imagine loading a webpage or downloading a file from the Internet to be like receiving a letter, the client server is like a decontamination room, where the letter is opened and only a picture is taken and sent to the recipient," said Mr Gan.

This process, he added, is safer as malicious or hidden material is left behind.

"Our earlier technical trial conducted at the healthcare clusters has shown that a virtual browser is technically feasible," said Mr Gan.

The next step would be to run a pi-



CRITICAL PART OF DEFENCES

We agree that the 'people' element is foundational and critical to our cyber defences. Every user needs to be trained and equipped to understand the important role they play in cyber defence.

“

MINISTER FOR HEALTH GAN KIM YONG

lot of this solution in different settings and healthcare roles to test its effectiveness, he added.

The pilot will begin in the first quarter of this year at the National University Health System. It will be evaluated over six months.

Mr Gan also gave an update on

the ongoing review of the safeguards for the National Electronic Health Record (NEHR) system that was triggered by the SingHealth data breach.

The NEHR has been undergoing penetration tests and cyber security assessment by the Cyber Secu-

rity Agency, GovTech and audit firm PricewaterhouseCoopers.

It will be tested further, he added.

Mr Gan also reiterated that given the importance of having safeguards in place, the Government will not require healthcare institutions to submit data to the NEHR until after the reviews are done.

Earlier, he described to the House his ministry's efforts in beefing up cyber security in the public health-care sector.

One, on the organisational front, it will separate the roles of the chief information security officer and the director of cyber security governance at the organisation in charge of the IT systems in the healthcare sector.

This technology vendor is the Integrated Health Information Systems (IHIS), which will have its own director of cyber security governance.

Also, the ministry's chief information security officer will be backed by a dedicated team at the ministry

and be in charge of cyber security for the healthcare sector.

Two, the healthcare sector will establish a more robust defence structure with three lines of defence.

The first involves staff who develop, deliver and operate IT systems; the second, those who oversee security strategy, risk management and compliance; and the third comprises independent checks.

Three, the sector will strive to improve staff's cyber security awareness and capacity, said Mr Gan, adding that IHIS will engage specialists to conduct realistic hands-on simulation training this year.

This will augment classroom simulation exercises for responders to security incidents.

"We agree that the 'people' element is foundational and critical to our cyber defences. Every user needs to be trained and equipped to understand the important role they play in cyber defence," said Mr Gan.

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News analysis

Lessons learnt will continue to be felt across all sectors



Irene Tham

Senior Tech Correspondent

The heavy fines and penalties meted out to two organisations and some of their staff members responsible for Singapore's worst data breach have concluded six months of intense scrutiny of the episode.

But the lessons learnt will continue to be felt across all sectors

in Singapore.

The Republic's privacy watchdog, the Personal Data Protection Commission (PDPC), imposed its largest-ever fine of \$750,000 on Integrated Health Information Systems (IHIS), SingHealth's IT vendor.

SingHealth, the target of the attack, did not get off scot-free either. Its fine of \$250,000 was the second-largest ever.

Lapses by the two organisations led to the country's worst data breach in June last year, involving the NRIC numbers, names, addresses, gender, race and birth dates of 1.5 million SingHealth patients. The attacker also exfiltrated the dispensed medication records of 160,000 patients, including that of

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. The fines broke the previous record of \$50,000 imposed on karaoke bar chain K Box over data leaks involving 317,000 customers in September 2014.

In dishing out the heavy fines, the PDPC has made it clear that there is value in personal data, even if it is basic information such as names and addresses.

In Parliament yesterday, Workers' Party MP Png Eng Huat (Hougang) pointed out a misunderstanding that was created in the aftermath of the attack when the Cyber Security Agency of Singapore described the stolen information as "basic demographic data" with "no strong commercial value". Mr Png pointed out the risk of

phishing and of scammers using the leaked data to trick people into revealing confidential information such as passwords.

This is why immediately after the SingHealth attack was made known to the public, the Monetary Authority of Singapore asked financial institutions to stop using NRIC numbers, addresses and dates of birth to verify the identity of customers.

They could instead use one-time passwords (OTPs). Millions of SingPass users also use their NRIC number to log into their Central Provident Fund accounts, to file income tax returns and to apply for work passes, among other things.

An event in 2014 – when three of 1,560 leaked SingPass accounts

were fraudulently used to make six work pass applications – show how far criminals can go with stolen demographic information.

Given the severity of the data leak, it is no wonder the PDPC said in its decision paper that IHIS could have received the maximum financial penalty of \$1 million allowed under the Personal Data Protection Act if not for several mitigating factors.

These factors include IHIS' willingness to cooperate during investigations and the remedial actions it took to inform affected patients and shore up its defences following the breach.

Since last week's release of a report by the Committee of Inquiry probing the cyber attack, disciplinary measures have also

been announced.

IHIS has fired two employees found to be negligent during the data breach, and demoted and redeployed its technology risk man. IHIS has also imposed "significant financial penalty" on five members of its senior management team, including chief executive officer Bruce Liang.

SingHealth's senior leadership team, including its group chief executive officer Ivy Ng, also voluntarily accepted an undisclosed financial penalty.

In the spirit of transparency, the financial penalties should have been disclosed to draw this chapter to a close.

Even as investigations end, Singapore will have to grapple with new cyber threats and the challenge of shoring up its defences.

As Minister-in-charge of Cyber Security S. Iswaran said in Parliament yesterday: "This was not the first instance where we were targeted, and it will not be the last."

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MOH to review medical claim limits more regularly

It will be done every three years or so, from every five years now

Salma Khalik
Senior Health Correspondent

The Ministry of Health (MOH) will review more regularly the claim limits that cap MediShield Life coverage and Medisave payments – around every three years or so.

Senior Minister of State for Health Edwin Tong yesterday promised more regular reviews when he addressed in Parliament the issue of how a patient received only \$4.50 from MediShield Life for his subsidised bill of \$4,477.

Currently, the plan is for the lim-

its to be reviewed every five years. Mr Seow Ban Yam, 83, had undergone surgery at the Singapore National Eye Centre (SNEC), and his subsidised bill was about \$1,400 above the MediShield Life claim limit.

His case was first reported in The Straits Times.

Mr Tong said the MOH will redouble its efforts to keep healthcare costs sustainable and affordable, and also "keep a close watch on public healthcare costs".

He said that should the current review exercise, which started last year, be completed ahead of

time, the revisions will be announced earlier.

Such a review "requires a careful assessment of the appropriate claim limits and also the consequential impact it may have on premiums, to ensure that the coverage of MediShield Life remains broad-based and sustainable".

Mr Tong was responding to Ms Tin Pei Ling (MacPherson) and Mr Murali Pillai (Bukit Batok) on whether MediShield Life provides adequate coverage.

He told the House that MOH had asked the SNEC to review its charges, and the centre has decided

after a review to scale down its fees for the procedure Mr Seow underwent, as well as for a number of other complex procedures that are higher priced, from March 1.

The number of subsidised bills that are within MediShield Life claim limits has fallen from nine out of 10, to eight out of 10. Mr Tong explained that one reason for this is increased healthcare costs.

But even so, about half the bills that top the MediShield Life claim limits do so by \$230 or less, he said.

Without claim limits, the premiums for MediShield Life, which insures people based on subsidised rates, will go up significantly, by 30 per cent or more, he added.

"Rather than impose this on all Singaporeans across the board, those who prefer to have higher coverage and are willing to pay higher premiums can consider private Integrated Shield Plans, which can include 'as-charged' features that cover 100 per cent of the bill," he said.

Mr Tong also promised that in reviewing claim limits, "we will ensure that they are in tandem with the cost" and that they also track inflationary cost for the healthcare sector.

Workers' Party Non-Constituency MP Leon Perera asked if there were "pertinent common characteristics" for the 10 per cent of subsidised bills that bust the claim limits by more than \$230.

Mr Tong said these were largely the more complex cases, with "patients who don't pass the means test for subsidies" forming a sizeable component.

Do public healthcare institutes check with the ministry when setting their prices, asked Mr Pillai.

To this, Mr Tong said there are "several hundred thousand bills", so it is not possible for the MOH to look at every bill.

But there are guidelines and benchmarks that the ministry will constantly look at and keep within a range that fits in with the philosophy of MediShield Life, he said.

He also promised: "We will continue to review, refine and strengthen MediShield Life and other components of our public healthcare financing system, and just as importantly, manage our healthcare costs to ensure that public healthcare remains affordable for all Singaporeans."



CONSTANT IMPROVEMENT

We will continue to review, refine and strengthen MediShield Life and other components of our public healthcare financing system, and just as importantly, manage our healthcare costs to ensure that public healthcare remains affordable for all Singaporeans.

“

SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE FOR HEALTH EDWIN TONG

Payment of subsidised bills

AFFORDABLE HEALTHCARE

Seven in 10 subsidised bills do not require cash payment. As for cash payment for the remaining three in 10:

- One pays less than \$100
- One pays \$100 to \$500
- One pays more than \$500

CHANGES IN MEDISHIELD LIFE

PAYOUTS IN 2017:

- \$845 million paid out to cover 555,000 claims.
- Average payout: \$1,520
- Average payout for top 10 per cent of bills: \$5,800

PAYOUTS IN 2015:

- \$448 million paid out to cover 344,000 claims.
- Average payout: \$1,300
- Average payout for top 10 per cent of bills: \$4,000

From reply by Senior Minister of State for Health Edwin Tong in Parliament



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Law amended to focus more on rehabilitation of drug abusers

Those who confess to taking drugs, and don't face other charges, will be sent for rehab

Cara Wong

Drug abusers who confess to consumption offences and do not face other criminal charges will be sent for rehabilitation to help them kick the habit, regardless of how many times they are arrested.

Previously, hardcore abusers – those caught for the third time or more – would be given sentences of at least five years in jail and three strokes of the cane under the Long-Term (LT) Imprisonment scheme that was introduced in 1998.

Speaking on the amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam told Parliament yesterday that a distinction would be drawn between "pure" abusers who only consume drugs and those who face charges over other offences.

He said pure abusers may include those with minor consumption-related offences like possession of drug-taking utensils or possession of small quantities of drugs.

Mr Shanmugam said these abusers will be channelled to the Drug Rehabilitation Centres (DRCs) if the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) agrees with the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) that there is no need to charge them over the minor offences.

This will begin from today, in a move "to benefit as many persons as possible", he added.

"We also want drug abusers to come forward voluntarily for rehabilitation. So, moving forward, drug abusers who voluntarily submit themselves to the CNB will be considered for a shorter detention in DRC," said Mr Shanmugam, adding that abusers will get two such surrender opportunities in their lifetime.

But abusers who deny their consumption charges or face charges

over other offences, such as drug trafficking and violent offences, will be put into another category and will be charged in court, if the AGC agrees.

Mr Shanmugam said the LT regime, along with other efforts, has improved the drug situation, with the number of abusers arrested each year dipping from just under 6,000 in 1996 to slightly above 3,000 in 2017.

But he said the move towards a greater focus on rehabilitation is prompted by research showing that long detention periods affect the abusers' ability to re-integrate into society, with the five-year recidivism rates for LT inmates remaining very high at 60 per cent. Such former abusers are less able to hold down a job after a long period in jail and often become estranged from their families and communities.

Citing the stepped-up support for abusers, Mr Shanmugam said the assessment is that "for pure abusers, we can now afford to shift the balance quite decisively and focus more on rehabilitation".

He said the changes to the Act, which were passed yesterday, are quite significant, pointing out that one out of every two recalcitrant abusers could be channelled to the rehabilitation regime.

Other key features of the new law include an enhanced direct supervision order for first-time abusers with low risk of taking drugs again.

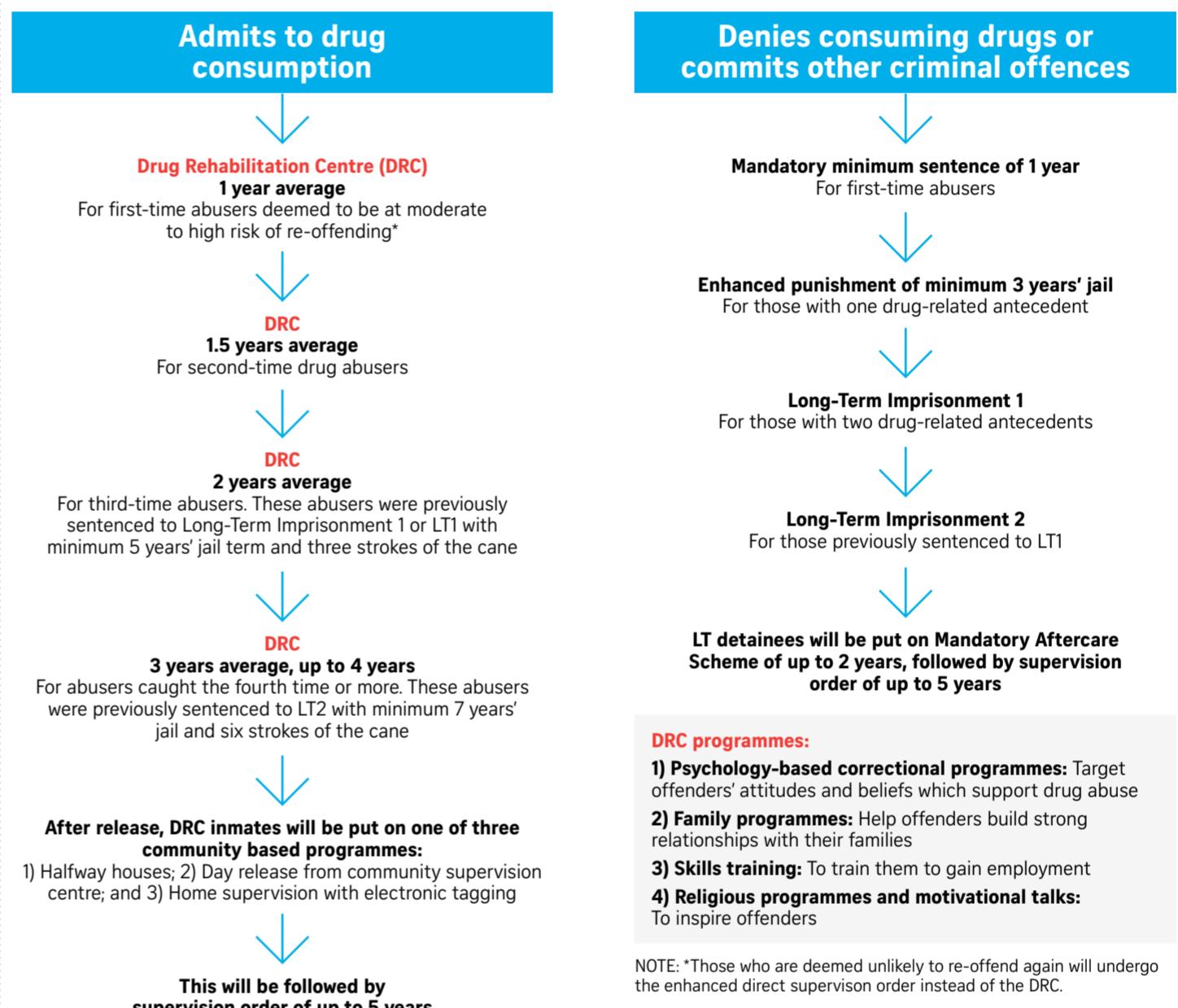
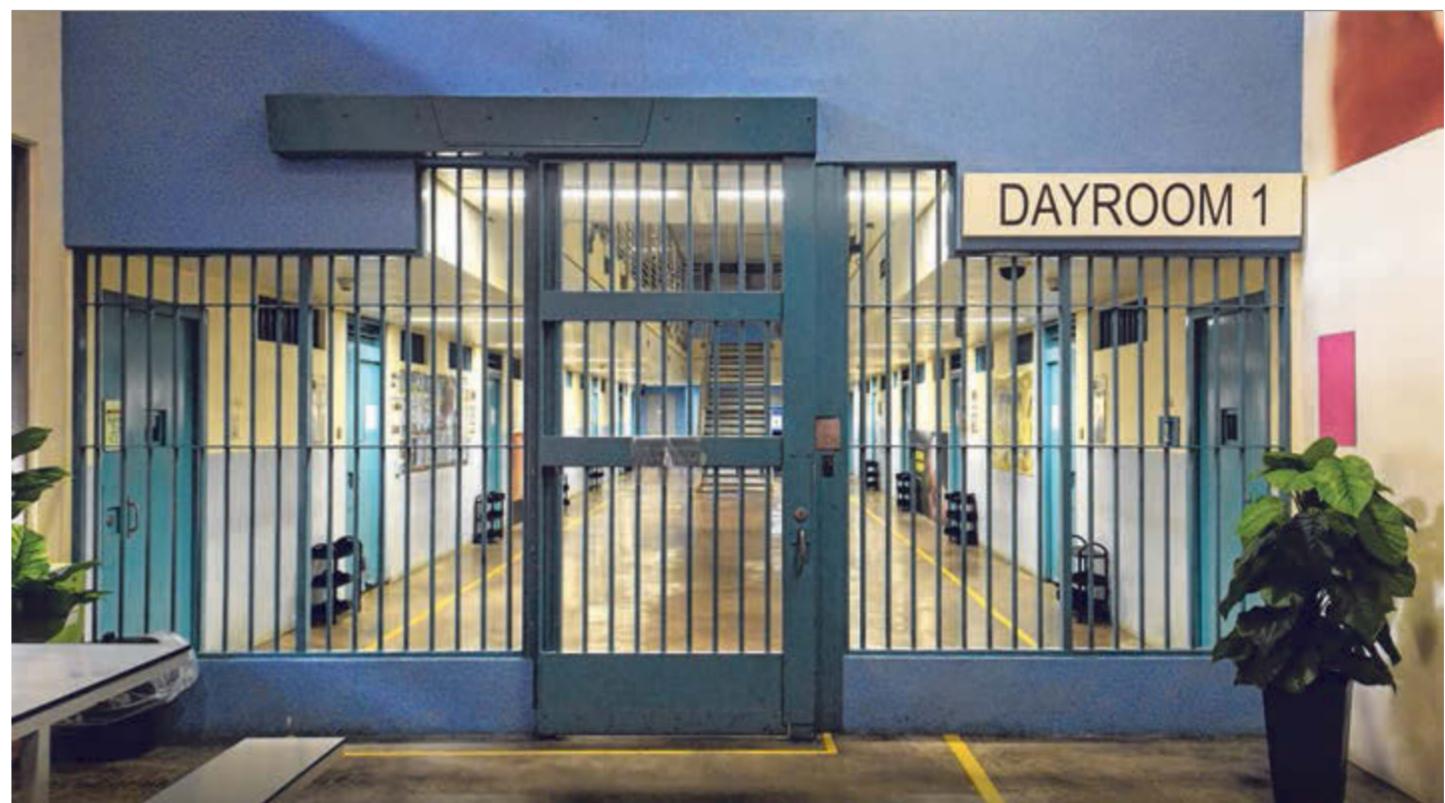
Drug abusers will also be placed under a longer period of supervision of five years, up from two years now, during which they would have to report to the CNB for urine or hair testing. The reason is the recidivism rates of abusers after release from DRCs drop quite sharply after five years, especially for those who can keep a job.

Another new feature is the mandatory minimum one-year jail sentence for first-time abusers who deny their consumption charges or face other criminal offences. This would also apply to those who fail to provide a urine or hair specimen.

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Sentences for drug abusers

A look at how abusers will be dealt with for their first and subsequent drug offences.



ST PHOTO: ALPHONSO CHERN STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Changes to rehab regime based on substantial evidence: Shanmugam

Tan Tam Mei

The move to strengthen Singapore's drug rehabilitation regime by channelling some abusers from long-term imprisonment to rehabilitation is based on knowledge and experience built up over the years.

This evidence-based approach is how the Republic will continue to tackle the drug problem, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said in Parliament yesterday.

day before the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill was passed.

"The knowledge and the experience built up over the last 20 years enable us to take a risk-based approach which, as far as possible, takes into consideration an individual's risk and protective factors so that the intervention is most effective and appropriate," he said.

The philosophy of a drug-free Singapore has not changed, he added in his response to some MPs expressing concern that the changes

may be perceived as the Government "going soft" on drugs.

Workers' Party chief Pritam Singh (Aljunied GRC) said he saw the changes as an example of rational and sensible policymaking, but some may "erroneously construe this shift as a relaxation of attitudes towards hardcore addicts".

Mr Shanmugam, stressing that the shift was based on a "substantive body of evidence-based work", said: "We will have no hesitation in refining or even changing

our policies based on evidence."

The debate attracted a slew of responses from the 16 MPs who spoke. These ranged from Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC) lamenting the increasingly liberal attitude of young adults towards drugs to Nominated MP Abbas Ali Mohamed Irshad noting the inflexible timings and delays drug abusers face during urine tests.

All, however, backed the new law, which aims, among others, to tackle "contaminative behaviours" like

teaching a person to engage in drug-related crimes. The crime carries a jail term of up to 10 years.

The law also states that adults who recklessly expose children to drugs or drug-related paraphernalia can be jailed for up to 10 years, in the case of first-time offenders.

Ms Rahayu Mahzam (Jurong GRC) was pleased with the move as anecdotal evidence shows children of addicts or those living with drug abusers are more likely to be influenced and trapped in the "un-

savoury world of drug addiction". MPs also supported making it compulsory for parents or guardians of young drug abusers to attend counselling, with many acknowledging the benefits of family support.

Failure to attend the sessions could result in a fine of up to \$5,000 or a court order to attend them.

Mr Melvin Yong (Tanjong Pagar GRC) suggested expanding the list to include all immediate family members, like an abuser's siblings.

"This could go some ways to help prevent the siblings from turning to drug abuse too," he said.

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New drug laws to tackle 'contaminative behaviours'

Showing another person how to consume, procure or traffic drugs will be an offence, under changes to the Misuse of Drugs Act passed in Parliament yesterday.

This new category of offences tackles "contaminative behaviours" that may not meet the current definition of trafficking or abetment, Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam said during the debate on the Bill.

"(But) they contribute to the spread of drug abuse. In that way, they harm others," he said.

The new offences will tackle acts of contamination such as introducing a person to a trafficker if one knows or has reason to believe that the person intends to buy or consume drugs the trafficker is likely to supply them with.

It will also be a crime to teach, instruct or provide information to another person on the consumption, cultivation and trafficking of drugs, among other activities, knowing or having reason to believe that the person intends to carry out the drug activity.

This carries a maximum of 10 years in jail with no mandatory



CAUSING HARM TO OTHERS

They contribute to the spread of drug abuse. In that way, they harm others.

“

MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS AND LAW K. SHANMUGAM, on showing another person how to consume, procure or traffic drugs.

minimum sentence for the first conviction.

Subsequent convictions will carry a mandatory minimum jail term of two years.

The minister said: "Supposing the perpetrator has no knowledge of the recipient's intention to commit a drug activity. Nevertheless, the perpetrator has still caused harm."

"He has spread information on the carrying out of drug activities."

The new law will also criminalise the disseminating or publishing of information on the carrying out of drug-related activities, making it an offence punishable with up to five

years in jail and a \$10,000 fine for first-time convictions.

The minister said: "This can cover a range of behaviour, from the irresponsible – like posting information on how to manufacture drugs on social media where others can see it – to the downright malicious – such as trying to teach and influence friends into taking drugs."

"We have to try and stop such behaviours."

However, there will be valid defences, including legitimate purposes relating to the administration of justice, science, medicine, education and art, not intended

to promote drug offending, said Mr Shanmugam.

The changes will also criminalise acts which expose children to drugs and those that permit young persons to consume drugs.

To better protect children, it will be an offence for an adult who possesses drugs or drug-related utensils to knowingly or recklessly leave them within reach of a child.

It will also be an offence for an adult to allow, or not take reasonable steps to prevent, a person under 21 from taking drugs that are in the adult's possession.

Under the amendments to the law, it will also be mandatory for parents and guardians of young drug abusers who are under supervision orders to attend drug counselling.

If the parents or guardians refuse to be involved in the child's counselling with no reasonable excuse, they can be fined or ordered by the court to attend the counselling sessions. This new law is expected to go into force by the first half of this year.

Tan Tam Mei

Drug rehab centre helping ex-addict kick habit

Having narrowly escaped a jail sentence for theft, former drug addict Farhan (not his real name) knew that he was to cherish the chance he had been given, with his second stay at the Drug Rehabilitation Centre (DRC).

The former hydraulic specialist was caught for drug consumption in January last year, after he was discovered high on cannabis at the void deck below his HDB flat. The police had come looking for him as he had been wanted for theft, said Farhan.

"When the police showed their badge, I thought to myself, 'Alamak,'" said Farhan, 30, speaking

to the media during a recent tour of the DRC.

Faced with a charge of theft and another charge over drug consumption, he could have been sentenced to a longer jail term for theft.

But he was sentenced to another stint at the DRC, where he had stayed in 2011 for an earlier drug consumption offence.

Counting himself lucky to escape jail and a criminal record, Farhan said he was determined to kick his drug habit by participating in the DRC's lessons and counselling sessions.

Besides a renewed attitude towards quitting drugs, Farhan said it also helped that the second DRC stay was more productive.

Not only are there more counselling sessions on managing drug addiction, there is also more interaction time with prison supervisors to recap the lessons learnt, he added.

Farhan, who has been at the DRC for about a year, believes these lessons will keep him away from drugs after his release.

"I am grateful and thankful for my second chance, I know I cannot waste it," he added.

Cara Wong

S'pore agencies told to exercise restraint over intrusions: Minister

Republic has ability to compel Malaysian govt vessels to leave its waters, he says

Linette Lai
Political Correspondent

Singapore has the ability to compel intruding Malaysian government vessels to leave its territorial waters, Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen said in Parliament yesterday.

But the Republic's security agencies have been ordered to exercise restraint and avoid escalating tensions for now, "so as not to jeopardise the conditions necessary for constructive discussions and peaceful resolution of the dispute".

Dr Ng made the point when replying to Non-Constituency MP Dennis Tan, who had asked what has been and will be done to prevent more Malaysian vessels from entering Singapore's territorial waters.

Last week, Johor Menteri Besar Osman Sapian posted on Facebook photos of him visiting a Malaysian government vessel anchored in Singapore's territorial waters off Tuas.

Incidents like this are "provocative and escalatory", and contradict the officially stated policy of the Malaysian government, Dr Ng said.

"Tensions and real risks increased during this incident," he said, adding that Singapore's security agencies had detected the movement of Datuk Osman's entourage early, during which the number of Malaysian government vessels in Singapore's waters increased from two to five.

"Our Police Coast Guard and Republic of Singapore Navy vessels responded promptly to this provocation, as they had to," he said.

"As a result, the total number of vessels in the area more than doubled. These provocations do nothing to help resolve disputes and indeed can precipitate incidents on the ground, which will do lasting harm to bilateral ties."

In October last year, Malaysia unilaterally extended the Johor Baru port limits into Singapore's territorial waters off Tuas.

Daily intrusions into these waters by Malaysian government vessels since November have continued despite the Malaysian Foreign Affairs Ministry declaring that it would take "all effective measures" to de-escalate the situation on the ground.

On Monday, Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan delivered a ministerial statement in Parliament setting out Singapore's position on the various disputes with Malaysia, including the issue of maritime boundaries.

Dr Balakrishnan said Malaysia's extension of port limits goes beyond even the territorial sea claims in its 1979 map, which Singapore has rejected consistently.

He also highlighted how Singapore has long exercised sovereignty and patrolled the disputed waters without any protest from Malaysia.

Dr Ng said Singapore's Police Coast Guard, Republic of Singapore Navy, and Maritime and Port Authority will continue to protect and assert the Republic's sovereignty in its territorial waters off Tuas and the waters in Singapore port limits.

"Our security agencies carry out their operational duties with the utmost professionalism," he said, adding that Singapore's security personnel have repeatedly pressed the Malaysian vessels to leave the area.

"We will continue to do so as their presence does not strengthen Malaysia's legal claims in any way, and indeed can result in mishaps or regrettable incidents," he said.

Separately, Malaysia's Economic Affairs Minister Azmin Ali told reporters after the swearing-in of the new Sultan of Pahang yesterday that there were bilateral issues, but added: "With the wisdom and the leadership of both countries, I believe engagement will provide a better result."

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SEE FORUM B8



Republic of Singapore Navy's littoral mission vessel RSS Justice (left) near the Malaysian Marine Department vessel Pedoman anchored within Singapore port limits. The Republic's security agencies have been ordered to avoid escalating tensions for now, "so as not to jeopardise the conditions necessary for constructive discussions and peaceful resolution of the dispute", said Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen. PHOTO: SINGAPORE POLICE FORCE



RISK OF INCIDENTS HAPPENING

Our Police Coast Guard and Republic of Singapore Navy vessels responded promptly to this provocation, as they had to. As a result, the total number of vessels in the area more than doubled. These provocations do nothing to help resolve disputes and indeed can precipitate incidents on the ground, which will do lasting harm to bilateral ties.

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DEFENCE MINISTER NG ENG HEN, on Johor Menteri Besar Osman Sapian visiting a Malaysian government vessel anchored in Singapore's territorial waters off Tuas.

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50,000 to < 200,000	0.38	1.52	1.62		
200,000 to 3 million	0.50	1.40	1.50		

Fresh Funds Deposit in Prestige Savings Account (\$)	Base Rates (% p.a.)	January 2019		February 2019	
		Bonus Rates (% p.a.)	Total Rate* (% p.a.)	Bonus Rates (% p.a.)	Total Rate* (% p.a.)
20,000 to < 200,000	0.38	1.62	2.00	1.72	2.10
200,000 to 5 million	0.50	1.50		1.60	

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Better job prospects for fresh poly grads last year

More found employment within six months and saw higher median pay than past cohort

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

Fresh polytechnic graduates last year did better than their seniors in employment and commanded higher salaries.

According to the latest graduate employment survey released yesterday, 89.5 per cent of graduates found permanent, freelance or part-time jobs last year within six months of graduation. This is 2.2 percentage points higher than the figure for the 2017 batch.

The proportion of graduates who were unemployed and still looking for a job fell from 9.7 per cent in 2017 to 8.2 per cent last

year, while the percentage of those working in part-time jobs not by choice dropped from 5.1 per cent to 2.2 per cent.

The survey, conducted by the five polytechnics, also showed that the median monthly salary for graduates who landed full-time jobs rose from \$2,235 in 2017 to \$2,350 last year.

Similar to 2017, health sciences graduates earned the highest median gross monthly pay of \$2,523 last year. Next in line were engineering graduates, who took home \$2,400, followed by those who studied information and digital technologies, with a salary of \$2,390.

In a statement yesterday, a spokesman for the Graduate Em-



Nanyang Polytechnic graduate Lan Yung Lee got a job last August as a security operations centre analyst at cyber security firm Ensign, a month after she started looking for employment. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

ployment Survey committee said the data showed that polytechnic graduates "enjoy good wage growth even as overall employment rates remain high".

"Over the years, we observed that students are becoming more open to voluntary part-time, temporary and freelance employment, besides

full-time permanent employment," he said.

"This is a reflection of the rising desire to further their studies, and also evolving employment preferences among our polytechnic graduates."

He noted that based on past trends, the majority of those ini-

Doing better than seniors

	2016	2017	2018
Overall employment rate	91.90%	87.30%	89.50%
Full-time permanent employment rate	59.80%	55.80%	59%
Median gross monthly salary*	\$2,200	\$2,235	\$2,350
Freelance employment rate	2.90%	4.20%	4.10%
Part-time/temporary employment rate	29.20%	27.30%	26.40%
Unemployment rate	8.10%	12.70%	10.50%

Which course pays the best?

	Median gross monthly pay*
Health sciences	\$2,523
Engineering	\$2,400
Information and digital technologies	\$2,390
Humanities and social sciences	\$2,300
Built environment	\$2,260
Arts, design and media	\$2,200
Business	\$2,200
Sciences	\$2,150

NOTE: *Refers to graduates in full-time permanent employment

Source: POLYTECHNIC GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT SURVEY
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

tially in part-time or temporary employment transitioned to full-time permanent jobs after some time.

The survey polled 9,330 out of 12,443 fresh graduates from November to December. They were asked about their employment status as at Oct 1 last year – about six months after their final exams.

Another 5,657 graduates from 2015 who completed their full-time national service between April 1, 2017, and March 31 last year also took part in the survey.

Nanyang Polytechnic graduate Lan Yung Lee started work last August as a security operations centre analyst at cyber security firm Ensign, after a one-month job search.

The 21-year-old, who graduated last year with a diploma in cyber security and digital forensics, said she decided to delve into the field after

reading in the news that cyber security professionals were in demand.

"The thing I find fun about cyber security is that it is like a game of catching. A malicious person can enter through a single hole, and we need to patch up all the holes – it is sort of a mind game," she said. "You need to put yourself in the shoes of an attacker to anticipate attacks."

Her job involves monitoring clients' networks for possible threats and investigating these. The hands-on modules and tasks have prepared her well for work, she said. But the working world also presents fresh challenges.

"Every day, there are new attacks that I may not have learnt in-depth about, or don't necessarily appear in textbooks or course materials. So, it is like learning a new thing every day," she said.

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Percussion instruments to be allowed at Thaipusam procession

Rahimah Rashith

Thaipusam will once again move to the beat this year.

Percussion instruments – including traditional Indian drums such as the thavil, dhol and khol – are allowed to be played by devotees at the annual event for the first time since 1973, when the playing of all music was banned after fights between competing groups.

Following feedback from the Hindu community, the authorities have been relaxing rules surrounding Thaipusam since a move in 2012 to allow music to be transmitted over broadcast systems at designated points along the procession's route.

This year, there will be 35 such points, 12 more than last year, with music allowed to be played from 7am – an hour earlier than last year – until 10.30pm.

The changes were revealed to The Straits Times by the Singapore Police Force (SPF) and the Hindu Endowments Board (HEB).

Some 20,000 people are expected at this year's Thaipusam procession, which will be held on Sunday and Monday.

Musicians accompanying kavadi-bearers, usually made up of friends and family or religious singers, will be allowed to play additional percussion instruments: the ganjira and one of either a thavil, dhol or khol.

Musicians must register themselves and their instruments with the HEB before the procession.

The festival, which usually takes place over a period of around 24 hours, is celebrated in honour of Lord Murugan, who represents virtue, youth and power.

Devotees seek blessings and fulfil their vows by carrying milk pots as offerings. Many also carry kavadis – structures of steel and wood – and pierce their bodies with steel rods, among other things, as they journey along a 3.2km route from Sri Srinivasa Perumal Temple in Serangoon Road to Sri Thendayuthapani Temple in Tanjong Katong.

The SPF said the new provisions were in response to feedback received by the HEB. It added: "The police have been working closely with the HEB to further facilitate Thaipusam over the years, taking into consideration the past conduct of participants and whether they adhere to the rules, or cause law and order or safety problems, or disturb residents and the general public."

HEB chief executive T. Raja Segar said he is thankful to the authorities

for taking the community's feedback into consideration.

"The Hindu Endowments Board is happy to have negotiated greater flexibility for music provision based on the feedback from Thaipusam devotees last year," he said. "Religious hymns, known as Bhajans, can be sung with more musical instruments, including one percussion instrument."

The 1973 ban on the playing of musical instruments during Thaipusam was introduced following fights between rival groups. But the rule has been relaxed since 2016, when live music was allowed in three locations along the procession route.

The HEB added that it has taken measures to ensure the procession runs smoothly, such as by installing barricades along the route and setting up water points and medical facilities.

University student Sathashivam Logaraj, 27, who plans to attend this year's procession, said: "It is wonderful that there was active discussion and interaction between the devotees and the authorities, and that it eventually concluded with more concession for music along the route."

He added: "It can be an arduous journey, and music motivates not just the devotees, but our family and friends as well. What my friends of other ethnicities and nationalities have always taken away from the festival are the drum beats and the music. And I am glad that we have been given the opportunity to showcase our tradition. I just hope that all of us will use this privilege respectfully."

For Mr U. Murali Raj, a kavadi-bearer, the music is an opportunity for devotees to focus on spirituality.

The 31-year-old civil servant, who will be participating in the procession for the 14th year, said: "It takes about two hours for my family to help me put on the 40kg kavadi. The music and drum will help us get our mind off the tiredness, the pain and the weight."

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The festival, which usually takes place over a period of around 24 hours, is celebrated in honour of Lord Murugan, who represents virtue, youth and power.



Sultan Abdullah takes oath as sixth sultan of Pahang

Nadiah H. Rodzi
Malaysia Correspondent
In Pekan (Pahang)

Malaysia's third largest state yesterday installed a new ruler with Sultan Abdullah Iбni Sultan Ahmad Shah ascending the throne, becoming Pahang's sixth monarch.

The 59-year-old took his oath after the proclamation of his appointment was read out by his younger brother, Tengku Muda Pahang Tengku Abdul Rahman, in a ceremony just before noon at Istana Abu Bakar, the palace located in the royal town of Pekan.

The installation of Sultan Abdullah puts him in line to become Malaysia's next king under the rotation system practised by the nine Malay royal houses in the country.

This follows the sudden abdication of Kelantan's Sultan Muhammad V as king on Jan 6 after just two years – three years short of a five-year reign – amid widespread speculation about his recent marriage to a Russian

woman in Moscow.

In a statement during the ceremony, Sultan Abdullah thanked his wife and spoke about his father, Sultan Ahmad Shah, who stepped down as ruler due to declining health. The 88-year-old reigned for almost 45 years.

"I hope the people will pray for my father," the new sultan said in a trembling voice, while visibly trying to hold back tears.

Sultan Abdullah, who is the fourth of eight siblings but the eldest son of the former ruler, was born on July 30, 1959.

The dynasty of the Pahang sultane can be traced back to 1882, and the last time an installation ceremony took place in Pekan was in 1974, when Sultan Ahmad Shah ascended the throne.

Among those who attended the royal ceremony yesterday were Foreign Minister Saifuddin Abdullah, Economic Affairs Minister Azmin Ali, former defence minister Hishammuddin Hussein, who is now an MP for Sembrong in Johor, and former premier Najib

Razak, who is the MP for Pekan. Najib is among the *Orang Besar Berempat* (Four Major Chiefs) in Pahang. Based on the traditions of the Pahang sultante, the installation of a ruler would be deemed incomplete without the *Orang Besar Berempat*.

Pahang residents welcomed the proclamation of their new sultan.

"I am very proud and happy that His Royal Highness was proclaimed the new sultan. I am sure he will do a good job in looking after our well-being. Whether or not he ends up as king, we are with him," said banana fritter seller Aisyah Mat Idris, 54.

Malaysia's Conference of Rulers – comprising the nine state sultans and four governors in states with no royal families (Penang, Melaka, Sabah, Sarawak) – will hold a special meeting on Jan 24 to elect the next king. Only royalty will be allowed to vote for a new king in the Council of Rulers.

Under the unique rotation system practised by the nine royal houses in Malaysia, Pahang is next in line for its ruler to be enthroned as the next king, followed by Johor, and then Perak.

The Keeper of the Ruler's Seal at the national palace Syed Daniel Syed Ahmad has said that the next king will take his oath on Jan 31.

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WORLD



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Delay in S'pore-KL meeting could deal blow to Iskandar

Confidence in Johor's key economic zone may take hit

Shannon Teoh
Malaysia Bureau Chief
In Kuala Lumpur

The postponement of Monday's bilateral meeting between Singapore and Malaysia on Johor's most important economic zone comes at an inopportune time for the southern state where investors have been hesitant for the past year.

The Joint Ministerial Committee for Iskandar Malaysia (JMCIM) meeting was postponed following Johor Menteri Besar Osman Sapian's decision last week to board a vessel in disputed waters off Tuas.

Singapore said his presence on a Malaysian vessel in Singapore's territory had rendered holding the JMCIM "untenable". Malaysia has maintained that he was in Malaysian waters.

The postponement could be a significant blow to Iskandar, as Singapore is the zone's second-largest foreign investor behind China, which is already expected to slow its investments in Malaysia, with relations cooling since Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad returned to office.

Official sources told The Straits Times that Datuk Osman defied instructions from Kuala Lumpur not to visit the crew of MV Pedoman, due to the sensitivity of various territorial disputes ahead of the JMCIM.

"It was a counterproductive stunt as foreign affairs come under federal jurisdiction. Singaporean interest in Johor, especially Iskandar, is going to be crucial in the near future as Chinese investments pull back," Singapore Institute of International Affairs senior fellow Oh Ei Sun said.

Singapore contributed nearly a quarter of the foreign investment in Iskandar as of November 2017, or RM22 billion (\$S7.3 billion) of the RM95 billion foreign investment in Iskandar.

Already there are signs that all is

RM95
billion

Total foreign investment in Iskandar.

23%

Singapore's contribution – or RM22 billion (\$S7.3 billion) – to foreign investment in Iskandar as of November 2017.

not well in Johor. From boasting total property transactions second only to Selangor in the first quarter of last year, Johor now has the largest residential overhang in the country.

Including serviced apartments and small offices, home offices, the nearly 14,000 unsold completed units in Johor in September last year were worth over RM10.6 billion, which was more than a third of the national overhang of RM27.4 billion.

Confidence in the property sector in Iskandar – which at 2,217 sq km is three times the size of Singapore – is a crucial indicator of sentiment, as developers have poured in more than half of the RM273 billion invested in the area since it was established in 2006.

"There is an oversupply of apartments and condominiums in Johor Baru because developers were 'enthralled' with Iskandar Malaysia when it was first announced, considering all the initiatives that they undertook like EduCity and pushing the industrial sector in the region," Datuk Zamani Kasim, chief execu-

tive of property developer Astaka Holdings, said last month.

Johor is languishing in the lower half in terms of gross domestic product per capita among Malaysian states, despite a concerted effort by both the federal and state governments to make Iskandar a catalyst in propelling its economy. At RM34,362, it is well below the national average of RM42,228.

Facing one of the highest inflation rates in the country, economic concerns weighed heavily in Johor in the run-up to the general election on May 9 last year. The birthplace of Umno was regarded as a bastion for the party, which was the main component of the previous Barisan Nasional coalition that ruled in Kuala Lumpur.

But, in a shock upset, Johor fell to the Pakatan Harapan alliance which swept to power in the election. The unprecedented change of government created uncertainty among investors.

Moving forward with development plans between Malaysia and Singapore would have allayed concerns over Iskandar. But as it stands, the planned Rapid Transit System Link between Johor Baru and Woodlands is behind schedule and not progressing well.

Transport Minister Khaw Boon Wan said on Monday that it was likely the cross-border MRT service will be delayed beyond the target of Dec 31, 2024.

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The Forest City residential project in Johor Baru by Chinese developer Country Garden. According to one analyst, Singaporean investments in Johor will be crucial in the future as Chinese investors pull back from the state amid cooling China-Malaysia relations.

ST FILE PHOTO

Older models are gold as labels woo silver spenders in China

SHANGHAI • Wearing a bright floral ensemble with her short hair dyed blonde, Chinese model Ma Yinhong struts a Shanghai catwalk with a style and swagger that belie her 56 years.

She made her modelling debut just two years ago and is already in demand, working for leading fashion brands such as Dolce & Gabbana.

Ms Ma is one of a growing number of older models sought after by Chinese and international labels trying to court the country's growing faction of "silver spenders".

She seems to embody this target market of older Chinese who are spending more on themselves.

"I never go out without dressing

up and getting made up. I never let myself look like an old granny," said Ms Ma at a recent show for Uooya, which used younger Chinese and foreign models, as well as seniors.

Once confined largely to life insurance and healthcare ads, today's glamorous Chinese seniors are in demand for high fashion.

By 2050, one in three people in China, or 487 million people, will be over the age of 60 – more than the population of the United States – according to the official Xinhua news agency. This greying population, combined with rising incomes and living standards, has led to a forecast of an explosion in consumption by China's seniors in coming years.



Once expected to selflessly stay home and mind the grandchildren, elderly Chinese, particularly women, have become a coveted market for products such as clothing, fashion accessories, cosmetics

and travel, according to consumer research firm Mintel.

Ms Michelle Chien, a modelling agent with ESEE Model Management, one of Shanghai's largest agencies, said that the market for se-

nior models in China is not huge yet, but it is growing. This echoes a trend now well established in Western markets, where brands have been keen to tap the pockets of the affluent baby

boomer generation. In the past five years, catwalks globally have seen greater age diversity and models such as Jacky O'Shaughnessy, Jan de Villeneuve, and billionaire Elon Musk's mother Maye Musk, making names for themselves as fashion stars in their 60s and 70s.

In her youth, Ms Ma had hoped for a career in fashion design. She moved to Japan to study in the 1980s but did not graduate as she could not afford the fashion fees.

But she did not start modelling until getting her first gig two years ago after sending her photo to a Shanghai fashion house.

Despite fashion brands embracing the grey hair and wrinkles that come with older models, Ms Ma said it is still important to stay stylish and in shape.

She gets her hair done every three weeks, and stays fit with daily breathing exercises and regular workouts at the gym.

"Keeping in good health keeps me on the catwalk. There is no age limit in fashion, so hopefully my dream can continue," she said.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

High stakes for PM May as lawmakers vote on Brexit plan

British leader's hopes of keeping unpopular deal alive hinge on scale of her expected loss

LONDON • British Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal is set for a make-or-break vote in Parliament early today, with defeat all but certain. The scale of the defeat, though, will determine her next steps and options for ending the impasse.

Barely 2½ months before Britain is due to leave the European Union, the potential outcomes include resurrecting her deal, leaving the EU with no deal at all, or holding another referendum that could halt Brexit altogether.

Mrs May's hopes of keeping her widely unpopular plan alive will

hinge on the scale of her expected loss. A comparatively narrow defeat could allow her to try again, but a loss by 100 votes or more would most likely be seen as dooming the plan for good.

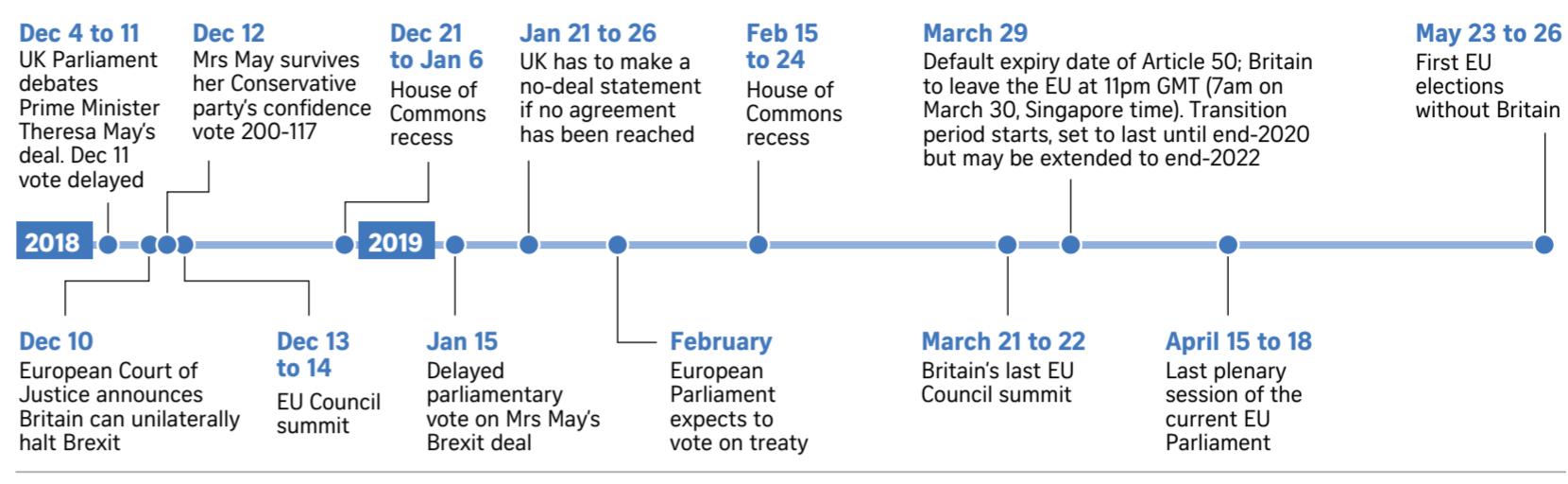
The vote was set to take place around 4am Singapore time today, with the announcement of the result possible about 15 minutes later.

As Britain's deepest political crisis for at least half a century came to a head, a spokesman for Mrs May said she would respond quickly to the result of the vote.

He also said there had been no

On the way to Brexit

Key meetings and decisions before reaching March 29, 2019 deadline and the first European elections without Britain.



Source: REUTERS STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS



Pro-Brexit and anti-Brexit demonstrators outside the Houses of Parliament yesterday ahead of a parliamentary vote on the Brexit deal struck between British Prime Minister Theresa May's government and the EU. A comparatively narrow defeat could allow her to try again, but a loss by 100 votes or more would most likely be seen as dooming the plan for good. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Smog continues to smother Thai capital

BANGKOK • The Thai capital was expected to be blanketed in smog until at least today despite the authorities' deployment of water cannon to combat air pollution.

The Pollution Control Department said yesterday that this was because cool weather continued to retain smoke and dust particles in the air around Bangkok and the nearby provinces, the Bangkok Post news website reported.

The department said air quality around parts of Bangkok as well as the provinces of Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, Samut Prakan and Samut Sakhon would be affected by the hazardous dust particles, which are known as PM 2.5.

PM 2.5 is harmful because its very fine dust particles are small enough to pass through a person's lungs and enter the bloodstream.

The Thai authorities on Monday



The Air Quality Index in Bangkok remained in the unhealthy range yesterday despite the deployment of water cannon to combat air pollution. PHOTO: EPA-EFE

turned to firing water cannon into the air and hosing down streets to tackle the smog that has been blanketing the atmosphere since last Saturday, news agency Reuters reported.

The Air Quality Index (AQI) on Monday morning in Bangkok was 180, according to the website airvisual.com, putting it among the top 10 polluted cities worldwide. The city's AQI yesterday evening

was 154. Any level above 150 is considered unhealthy.

The air force yesterday deployed two BT-67 aircraft from the north to spray water in Bangkok's Don Muang and Chatuchak districts. Government spokesman Puttipong Punnakanta said its agencies had taken urgent measures such as controls on construction sites and strict inspection of polluting vehicles, Bloomberg reported.

discussion at a meeting between Mrs May and her Cabinet yesterday morning about delaying Brexit beyond the March 29 deadline.

Mrs May says accepting her deal is the only way Parliament can fulfil its promise to deliver on the 2016 vote to quit the EU, and failing to do so would be "catastrophic" for democracy. Her ministers pressed that message on the morning of the vote.

"The British people have placed a responsibility on us," Environment Secretary Michael Gove told BBC radio. "Are we going to live up to that responsibility and vote to leave the European Union, or are we going to disappoint them and damage our democracy by not voting to leave the EU?"

Many Brexit-supporting lawmak-

ers from Mrs May's Conservative Party reject the deal, particularly a "backstop" requirement that Northern Ireland stay closely aligned to EU rules to avoid the return of a hard border with EU member Ireland.

Mr Dominic Raab, who resigned as Mrs May's Brexit minister last November in protest against her plans, said the government should not lose its nerve over the possibility of a no-deal Brexit, something many employers fear would mean chaos for business.

"It's time for us, through this vote, to make clear not just that the current terms are unacceptable, but also that we are not just throwing our hands up in the air," he said. "We are going to leave on March 29."

Investors sense the possibility of

a no-deal Brexit is receding, given the concerns of lawmakers about the upheaval it could bring. The sterling hit a two-month high against the United States dollar on Monday and held near that level yesterday.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the EU could hold new talks with Britain after a defeat in Parliament of the plan Mrs May struck with other leaders of the bloc last November, but he ruled out significant changes to the agreement.

Mrs May has refused to budge over her deal. The agreement, which envisages close economic ties with the EU, has united the opposing sides of the debate – pro-EU lawmakers who see it as the worst of all worlds and Brexit supporters who say it will make Britain a vassal state.

Mrs May has warned pro-Brexit lawmakers that if her plan is rejected, no Brexit at all would be more likely than Britain leaving the EU without a deal. She has also warned her party against allowing the left-wing opposition Labour Party to seize the initiative.

Labour is formally committed to Brexit but opposes her deal. Polls of party activists show that most want the party to back a new referendum. It has not done so, but has not ruled it out if Mrs May's deal is voted down and she refuses to resign.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, hoping to force a national election, is expected to call for a parliamentary vote of no confidence in Mrs May if she loses today's vote.

REUTERS, BLOOMBERG

DEMOCRACY UNDER THREAT

Are we going to live up to that responsibility and vote to leave the European Union, or are we going to disappoint (the British people) and damage our democracy by not voting to leave the EU?

“

BRITISH ENVIRONMENT SECRETARY MICHAEL GOVE

TAKE A CLEAR STANCE

It's time for us, through this vote, to make clear not just that the current terms are unacceptable, but also that we are not just throwing our hands up in the air.

“

MR DOMINIC RAAB, who resigned as Mrs May's Brexit minister last November in protest against her plans.

Thailand to delay election yet again to March, say officials

BANGKOK • Thailand's long-delayed general election to end military rule will have to be postponed and will likely be held in March, two officials in the Election Commission said yesterday.

The Election Commission of Thailand has not announced the postponement but two senior election officials said it was impossible to hold the poll on Feb 24, as announced last month.

The military junta that has ruled for nearly five years had earlier suggested a one-month delay because of scheduling clashes with the coronation of King Maha Vajiralongkorn in May.

"The Feb 24 election cannot take place because the Election Commission doesn't have enough time to organise it," a senior commission official said. "There are now two possible dates, March 10 or March 24."

Coronation ceremonies for the King have been scheduled for

May 4 to 6, and the government said there would be royal rituals taking place 15 days before and after those three dates.

"There will be an election before coronation," Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha told reporters yesterday. "We have to organise both things together but we must first give time to the coronation preparation."

The two largest political parties said they had no objection to the delay.

Under the law, the Election Commission has to endorse winning Members of Parliament within 60 days of a vote, and Parliament must convene within 15 days of the election results. The King will have to preside over the opening of Parliament.

The government said these political events could clash with ceremonies for the coronation.

The monarchy is revered in Thai-

land and this year's coronation will be the first in living memory for most of the population.

King Vajiralongkorn, 66, has been serving as monarch since shortly after his father died in 2016 following a 70-year reign, but he has not been officially crowned during a lengthy mourning period.

The military government has repeatedly delayed holding a new election since it overthrew an elected prime minister in a 2014 coup.

Last month, the junta lifted a ban on political activities imposed since the coup, which allows political parties to start campaigning.

Dozens of activists protested on Jan 6 against a possible delay of the election in Bangkok, the first such gathering since the government lifted the ban on political activity. Since then, there have been several similar gatherings in other parts of the country.

REUTERS

Canadian Robert Lloyd Schellenberg at his retrial in a court in Dalian in China's north-east Liaoning province on Monday. He was initially sentenced to 15 years in prison for drug smuggling, but the death sentence was imposed on him following the retrial.

PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



Trudeau's remarks on drug case irresponsible: China

Beijing defends court decision after Canada's PM criticises death penalty against its citizen

Tan Dawn Wei
China Bureau Chief
In Beijing

China has hit back at Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, denouncing as "irresponsible" his accusation that it had arbitrarily applied the death penalty to a Canadian national for drug smuggling.

A day after Robert Lloyd Schellenberg, 36, was handed a death sentence following a retrial in the city of Dalian, China defended the court decision and urged Canada to respect its judicial sovereignty.

"Everyone is equal before the law. This is the true spirit of the rule of law. The comments coming from Canada lack the most basic understanding of that, and we express

our strong dissatisfaction," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Hua Chunying yesterday.

The latest war of words will no doubt aggravate already strained diplomatic ties between the two sides after Canada arrested Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou last month on a US extradition warrant, and China in turn detained two Canadians in what was seen as a retaliatory move.

Schellenberg, who has previous drug convictions in Canada, was initially sentenced to 15 years in prison for smuggling 222kg of

methamphetamine. On Monday, the court in Dalian, acting on an appeal, imposed the ultimate sentence on him, prompting Mr Trudeau to accuse China of "arbitrarily" applying the death penalty.

Canada later issued a travel advisory warning its citizens of arbitrary arrests in China.

When asked yesterday, Ms Hua said: "It should issue a reminder to Canadians not about the threats they may face in China, but a reminder that they should not engage in drug trafficking activities. If you come to China to engage in seri-

ous crimes, there will be serious consequences."

The ministry later issued a similar travel notice, warning Chinese citizens of the risks of being "arbitrarily detained at the request of a third nation" in Canada.

Schellenberg claims he was framed by drug traffickers after Chinese police arrested him on a plane in Guangzhou in 2014. He has been in jail since then and was sentenced last November but, on Dec 29, a Chinese court ordered a retrial after prosecutors uncovered fresh evidence pointing to his role in organised international drug trafficking.

His lawyer said yesterday that he would be appealing against the death sentence.

China seemed eager to whip up international attention on the case, allowing foreign media to cover the retrial.

Foreigners found guilty of drug trafficking in China have not been spared capital punishment previously. Since 2000, more than 10 foreigners from Britain, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, South Africa, Myanmar, Laos and Russia have reportedly been sentenced to death in Chinese courts.

Yesterday, Beijing took the opportunity to warn Canada again of "serious consequences" over the arrest of Ms Meng, calling it "an abuse of judicial procedures".

She is wanted in the United States for violating Iran sanctions.

In the wake of her arrest, China detained and continues to keep behind bars two Canadians – former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor – for endangering China's national security.

Both Canadian and Chinese media has taken sides in the worsening diplomatic row. The nationalistic Global Times in China accused Ottawa of double standards.

"Whatever Canada does, it is the rule of law, but whatever China does is not," it said in an editorial yesterday, adding that Canada should "wake up from such cultural and value narcissism".

Canada's biggest paper, The Globe and Mail, argued in an editorial on Monday that while Canada has ensured Ms Meng's rights were respected and proceedings have been carried out in open courts, China has denied Mr Kovrig and Mr Spavor regular consular and legal access, and public court appearances.

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Chinese state firms told to shun trips to US

BEIJING • China asked some state-run enterprises to avoid business trips to the United States and its allies and to take extra precautions to protect their devices if they need to travel, according to people familiar with the request.

In recent weeks, the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) – a regulatory body that oversees about 100 government-run companies – has told some firms to take only secure, company-issued laptops meant for overseas use if travelling is necessary, the people said.

They said the warning also extended to the other countries in the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing pact: Britain, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

The people also said employees have been asked to have the company verify which files they are carrying on any trip and store them only on secure USB drives, adding that the SASAC did not specify how long the travel rules will apply.

Chinese and American executives have become more cautious when travelling after the arrest last month of Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou in Canada on behalf of the US, and the subsequent detention of two Canadian citizens in China.

Tensions between Beijing and Ottawa have also risen after a Chinese man to death for drug trafficking after a one-day retrial.

Canada and China have both issued travel alerts, against each other, to their citizens.

"As long as foreigners, including Canadians, abide by the law, their freedom and safety is guaranteed," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hua Chunying told reporters at a regular briefing in Beijing yesterday.

"It is Canada, not China, that is arbitrarily detaining foreign citizens under the guise of the law."

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Prabowo vows to lift poor out of poverty as he sets out vision

Indonesian presidential candidate unveils people-centred plan before election debates

Linda Yulisman
Indonesia Correspondent
In Jakarta

FRESH IDEAS

He talked about... the economy and poverty, and ways to overcome the problems, such as economic inequality. His speech offers fresh ideas and new hopes.

DR SITI ZUHRO, a political expert from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences.

President Joko Widodo in 2014. Noting the economic challenges faced by South-east Asia's largest economy, he said: "If we are not careful, if we are not vigilant, if we do not change, if we do not act immediately, this situation will worsen."

One of his goals is for Indonesia to achieve self-sufficiency in food, energy and water, and to develop stronger government institutions as part of a "big-push strategy", he said.

He proposed five areas of focus to address the country's concerns. Besides realising a people-centred economy, the others include improving the quality of life and social welfare so as to reduce the rich-poor gap, and ensuring justice in law and quality democracy.

As part of the economic focus, Mr Prabowo said the aim is to create jobs, raise people's purchasing power and promote industrialisation, including the production of high-tech products such as cars, helicopters and warships.

"Industrialisation is a must for our country. We will make Indonesia like India and South Korea, which have world-class industrial

companies," he said.

He also proposed plans to convert millions of hectares of degraded forests so they can be used for food production and energy generation, and to establish special banks for farmers and fishermen to give them access to funding and technology.

Other plans include improving healthcare services, raising the salaries of those working in the health and education sectors, and providing free milk and lunch for school children because malnutrition leads to retarded growth.

Dr Siti Zuhro, a political expert from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, said Mr Prabowo's speech addressed the most crucial issues facing the country.

"He talked about... the economy and poverty, and ways to overcome the problems, such as economic inequality," she told The Straits Times. "His speech offers fresh ideas and new hopes."

Dr Siti noted that the ideas came from the Prabowo team's on-the-ground engagement with ordinary people such as traders, farmers and fishermen around the coun-

try, and may attract swing or undecided voters.

Mr Arya Fernandes, a political analyst from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, however, thought that Mr Prabowo's speech lacked focus because he was trying to cover too many issues.

"If only he had focused on economic issues, the speech could have been much more interesting and given a new perspective on economic ideas," said Mr Arya, who added that Mr Prabowo's speech should have targeted swing and undecided voters.

About a fifth of 193 million eligible voters are still undecided, and their support could go either way, according to Gadjah Mada University political analyst Kuskradio Ambardi.

A survey by Jakarta-based pollster Indikator Politik Indonesia last month showed support for the Prabowo-Sandiaga team had risen to nearly 35 per cent, up 4.8 percentage points from last October.

However, Mr Joko and his running mate, cleric Ma'ruf Amin, still led by 20.1 percentage points.

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Mr Donald Tsang, who was Hong Kong's leader from 2005 to 2012, was convicted of misconduct in office.

Ex-HK leader vows to clear name following jail time

Claire Huang
Hong Kong Correspondent

Former Hong Kong chief executive Donald Tsang has vowed to clear his name after he completed a 12-month prison sentence for misconduct in office.

Mr Tsang, who suffers from asthma, spoke to the media briefly at Queen Mary Hospital yesterday morning, where he had been transferred to last Friday after complaining of being unwell while in the maximum-security Stanley Prison.

"You will understand that as a Hong Konger, under Hong Kong's rule of law, I have to persist in seeking justice. I have to clear my name. I cannot give up," he said.

Holding his wife's hand, he expressed gratitude to his supporters. He said he wanted to spend time with his wife and family, and have a "normal and quiet" life in retirement.

Journalists asked Mr Tsang, who was the city's leader from 2005 to 2012, to compare his case with that of another former Hong Kong leader, Mr Leung Chun Ying, who was subjected to a four-year investigation in connection with allegations of misconduct.

The allegations were linked to a HK\$50 million (S\$8.7 million) payment from Australian engineering company UGL, which bought a firm of which Mr Leung was a director. Part of the payment, for a non-compete pledge, was made after he took office but was allegedly not declared. Last month, the government dropped the probe against him because of lack of evidence.

"If you don't mind, I do not wish to compare, because it would rekindle my anger and hatred that were cleared a few months ago after a lot of effort," Mr Tsang said without elaborating. "There is only one thing in my heart today: gratitude."

When asked what the first thing he wanted to do was now that he was free, he said he wished to have a chat with his wife, Selina, and enjoy a cup of coffee - something he has not had for "a long time".

He said he was able to speak with her, without privacy, only once a week in jail.

He is the first Hong Kong leader to have been convicted in a criminal trial. He was charged in October 2015 with failing to disclose his plans between 2010 and 2012 to lease a Shenzhen luxury flat from a major investor in a broadcast firm.

The broadcast firm was later granted a government broadcast licence, during his tenure in office.

His trial on two counts of misconduct in office and one of accepting a bribe began in January 2017. In mid-February that year, he was found guilty on one count of misconduct but acquitted of the other.

The bribery charge was left undecided by the jury. His sentence was shortened from 20 months to a year last July following an appeal.

The Court of Final Appeal will in May hear his final bid to overturn his conviction.

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Hindu holy men taking a dip in the waters of the holy Sangam – the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers – during the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad yesterday. The festival is expected to attract more than 100 million pilgrims to the city in Uttar Pradesh over the next seven weeks to bathe in waters considered among the holiest in Hinduism. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Millions of Hindus gather for holy dip in India

ALLAHABAD (India) • The largest gathering of humanity on the planet began yesterday, with tens of millions showered in rose petals and holy ash at a spectacular Hindu festival on India's sacred riverbanks.

The Kumbh Mela is expected to attract more than 100 million pilgrims to Allahabad over the next

seven weeks to bathe in waters considered among the holiest in Hinduism.

Allahabad rises alongside the Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati, and the banks of these hallowed rivers have transformed into a riot of colour for the centuries-old festival.

A gigantic tent city has emerged

near the confluence of the rivers, where Hindus believe bathing during the Kumbh helps cleanse sins and brings salvation.

Before dawn, thousands of naked holy men smeared in ash, some on horseback, proceeded towards the rivers' meeting point known as "Sangam". The "naga sadhus", or holy men, plunged into the chilly waters before the sun rose, as nearby devotees chanted praises to the Hindu deity Shiva.

Throughout the day, millions of pilgrims will queue in huge processions for their chance to plunge into the waters in northern Uttar Pradesh state.

The last major gathering in Allahabad in 2013 drew an astonishing 120 million people, organisers said.

Thirty million devotees – more than the entire population of Australia – are said to have bathed on a single auspicious day.

A helicopter dropped rose petals yesterday on an endless sea of dreadlocked sadhus smoking marijuana, priests offering blessings in saffron robes and pilgrims from every corner of India.

"All the Gods descend on this sacred place during this period. This is the most auspicious event for any human being," said 60-year-old devotee Chandans Pandey.

Nearly 30,000 police have been deployed to oversee crowds for the huge undertaking, and prevent stampedes that have marred previous gatherings.

Patrol drones buzzed over a 45 sq km encampment set aside specially for pilgrims – a temporary city three-quarters the size of Manhattan.

Restaurants, roads and marketplaces have sprung up to cater to the huge influx of visitors, along with 122,000 toilets and 300km of road.

The Kumbh, which runs until March 4, was recognised as an intangible cultural heritage by Unesco in 2017. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Fake goods weeded out successfully on Taobao: Alibaba

Lim Yan Liang
China Correspondent
In Beijing

Just over one in every 10,000 orders on Alibaba's Taobao marketplace last year involved suspected fake goods, the Chinese tech giant has said, as it claimed success in reducing piracy on the world's largest e-commerce platform.

In its annual intellectual property (IP) protection report last week, Alibaba said big data analysis and closer cooperation with brands and law enforcement had snuffed out counterfeiting on Taobao. It is the

world's seventh-most visited website, ahead of Amazon, and has 666 million active users monthly.

"Sources of counterfeit goods were put under unprecedented pressure, and the space for counterfeiters was squeezed to a high degree last year," said Alibaba chief of platform governance Zheng Junfang.

For instance, IP rights complaints from brand owners fell 32 per cent last year compared with the year before, said the report. Alibaba also managed to take down 96 per cent of goods suspected of having infringed IPs before any sales were made.

"It was the first time that all indicators in the fight against sales of

counterfeits online showed a sharp decline," Ms Zheng added.

In recent years, Alibaba has publicly intensified its fight against counterfeit goods, even going as far as establishing a research institute – on World Intellectual Property Day last April – to set rules for IP protection.

Still, Taobao has consistently been named on a US government blacklist of online and physical marketplaces judged to have facilitated "substantial piracy and counterfeiting".

First put on a US Trade Representative (USTR) list in 2008, Taobao was removed between 2012 and 2015 in recognition of its anti-piracy efforts. But it was back on the Noto-

rious Markets List in 2016, and in the most recent report last year.

While the USTR noted that Alibaba had taken positive steps to fight piracy, it said a high volume of infringing products reportedly continued to be sold on Taobao.

"Alibaba has not identified metrics to assess objectively the scale of infringing products sold on Taobao.com nor objectively demonstrated that the volume or prevalence of counterfeit goods has decreased over the last year," it said.

Data released by Alibaba also does not reflect the scale of the problem on Taobao and is "merely suggestive of progress made", it added.

Alibaba has protested against its blacklisting as scapegoating, and called the list "deeply flawed, biased and politicised".

Experts said counterfeiters have evolved their tactics in their cat-and-mouse game with IP-protection counter-measures on Taobao.

Last November, trademark law journal World Trademark Review found that Taobao remains the go-to platform for fake consumer goods.

A casual check on Monday showed that fake luxury goods were still easily available on Taobao, but under creative code names.

Counterfeit Gucci jackets were labelled "G-house" and knock-off

Ralph Lauren polos were peddled under "Little horse brand". Both logos were blurred out or pixelated to prevent automatic flagging by Taobao.

Counterfeiters were also increasingly hawking their goods on foreign social media, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, and through third-party image hosting sites such as Yupoo.

Said Alibaba: "It is extremely urgent that the various platforms and markets, through both online and offline measures, come together and strike back (against counterfeiters)."

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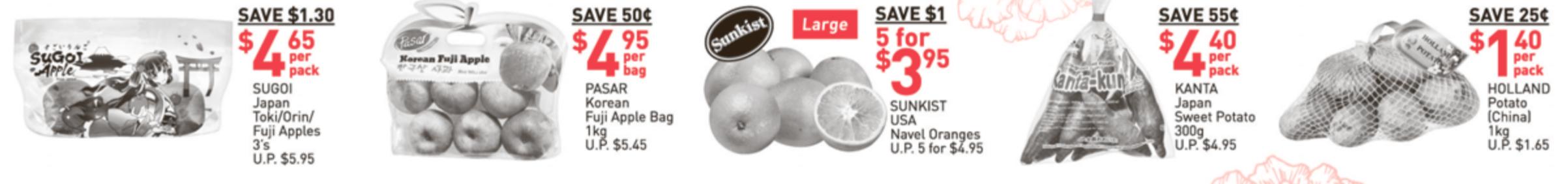
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SCAN TO SHOP

Fresh strike hits major German airports

Hundreds of flights axed at eight airports; 220,000 travellers hit by cancellations, delays

FRANKFURT • Hundreds of flights were cancelled at eight German airports yesterday, including at the nation's busiest travel hub Frankfurt, as security staff walked off the job in a deepening row over pay.

Germany's powerful Verdi union said the strike would last from 2am until 8pm local time (9am Tuesday to 3am Wednesday, Singapore time) at Frankfurt airport, with walkouts in Munich, Hanover, Bre-

men, Hamburg, Leipzig, Dresden and Erfurt following roughly the same schedule.

At least 220,000 travellers will be hit by cancellations and delays, the ADV airport association said, in a calculation that includes knock-on effects at other airports.

Frankfurt airport operator Fraport, which has axed 610 out of around 1,200 scheduled flights, urged passengers not to come to

Europe's fourth-busiest airport during the strike. At Munich airport, Germany's second largest, a spokesman said around 100, mainly domestic, flights were cancelled.

The coordinated industrial action marks a major escalation in Verdi's dispute with employers, following walkouts at Berlin's airports last Monday and in Stuttgart, Cologne/Bonn and Duesseldorf last Thursday.

Germany's flagship carrier Lufthansa accused Verdi of ramping up tensions "to an unacceptable extent".

The ADV airport association

blasted the wave of strikes as "irresponsible". "Verdi is unjustifiably carrying out these strikes on the backs of travellers, airlines and airports," ADV head Ralph Beisel said in a statement.

Verdi, which represents some 23,000 aviation security workers, said it was forced to ramp up pressure because talks with the BDLS employers' association were deadlocked. "Employers did not respond to last week's warning strikes at all; they haven't come up with an improved offer," Verdi board member Ute Kittel told public broadcaster ZDF.

The union wants to see wages raised to €20 (\$\$31) an hour for workers carrying out passenger, freight, personnel and goods checks at all German airports.

"We already have the lowest quality security checks at the highest costs, compared to Europe and other countries around the world," said Lufthansa board member Detlef Kayser.

The dispute is the latest upheaval for air travellers in Germany, after a series of strikes by Ryanair cabin and cockpit crew in the second half of last year, including two pan-European walkouts, caused huge disruption. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Somali militants claim attack on Nairobi hotel

NAIROBI (Kenya) • Explosions and gunfire rocked an upscale hotel in Kenya's capital Nairobi yesterday, in a terrorist attack that sent people fleeing into the streets and left body parts on the ground.

The Somali militant group Al-Shabaab, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda, told several Western media organisations that it was behind the attack, describing it as "ongoing".

"We are behind the attack in Nairobi. The operation is going on. We shall give details later," the group's military operations spokesman Abdiasis Abu Musab told news agency Reuters.

Kenya police chief Joseph Boinett confirmed it was a suspected militant attack.

There could still be armed assailants in the building and the police operation was ongoing, he told reporters in a short briefing.

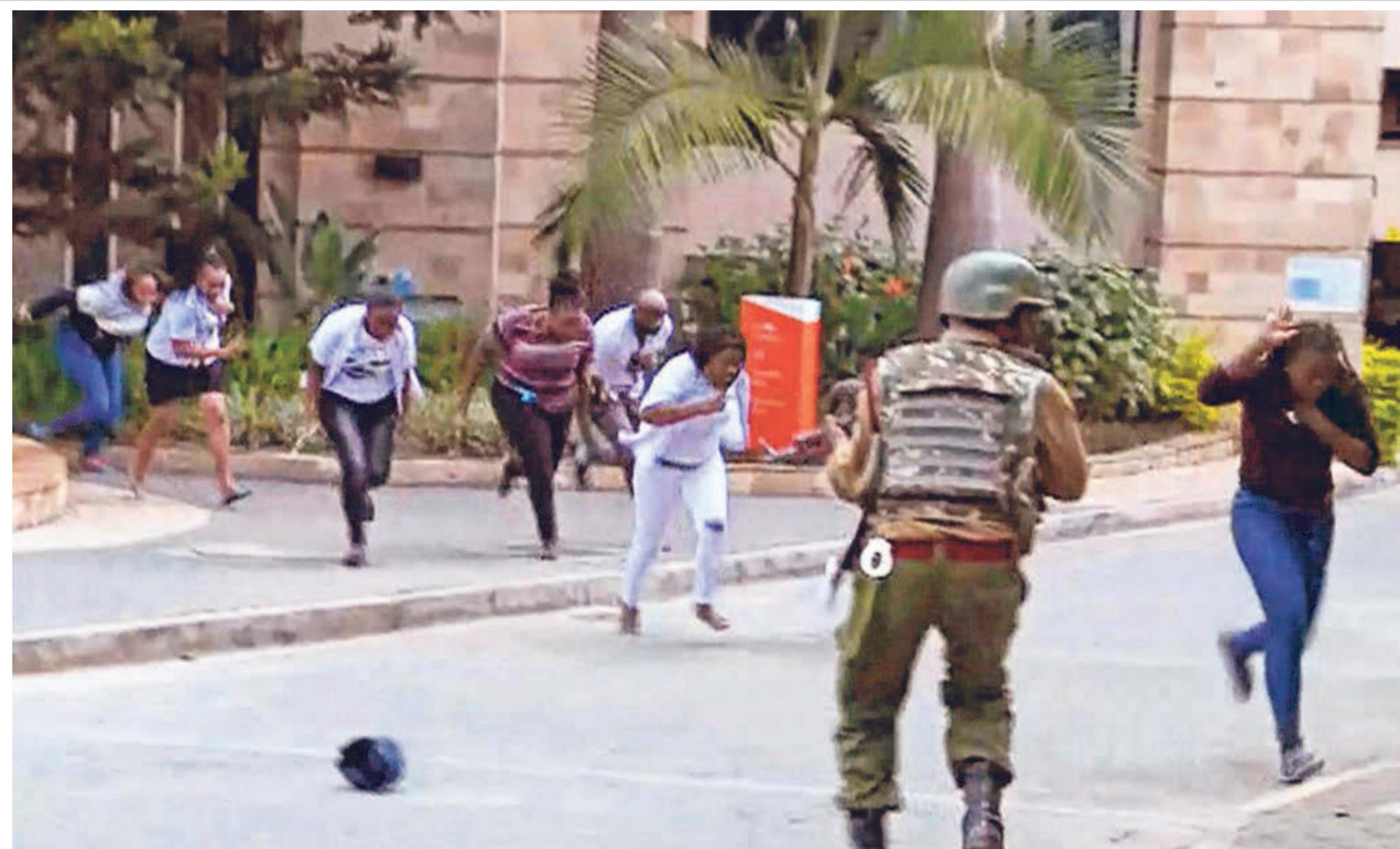
Smoke from burning cars rose in the air outside the DusitD2 hotel and office park in Riverside Drive in Nairobi's Westlands neighbourhood. The complex includes a 101-room hotel, restaurant and several office buildings housing local and international companies.

The building was surrounded by heavily armed police and ambulances as wounded people were carried out on stretchers.

"There's a grenade in the bathroom," an officer yelled as police rushed out from one building.

A picture of the grounds on Twitter showed what appeared to be a human leg on the ground.

Police on the scene said there



might still be hostages in the building, which has been cordoned off.

"We have to go for the highest incident that could take place. The highest incident we have is a terror (attack)," police spokesman Charles Owino told Citizen Television. Violent robberies are also common in Kenya.

Upon finding one another safe.

Everywhere outside the hotel were wounded people, and there were pools of blood on the ground. "I am in 14 Riverside Drive hiding in a bathroom and we are under attack," tweeted one man who described himself as being on the scene of the attack.

"There was a massive bomb blast then gunshots..."

Kenya has been repeatedly attacked by fighters from the militant Al-Shabaab movement based in neighbouring Somalia, most dramatically in 2013 in an attack on the Westgate mall that killed 71 people, as well as nearly 150 students at a university in 2015.

WASHINGTON POST, REUTERS



Above: TV footage shows people fleeing the scene amid a gunfight following a blast at the hotel and office complex in Nairobi.

Left: People being evacuated from the hotel compound where explosions and gunshots were heard.

PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, REUTERS

Antarctica ice loss six times faster than in 1979: Report

TAMPA • Global warming is melting ice in Antarctica faster than ever before – about six times more per year now than 40 years ago – leading to increasingly high sea levels worldwide, scientists warned on Monday.

Already, Antarctic melting has raised global sea levels more than 1.4cm between 1979 and 2017, said the report in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), a peer-reviewed United States journal.

And the pace of melting is expected to lead to disastrous sea level rise in the years to come, according to lead author Eric Rignot, chair of earth system science at the University of California, Irvine.

"As the Antarctic ice sheet continues to melt away, we expect multi-metre sea-level rise from Antarctica in the coming centuries," Mr Rignot said.

A rise of 1.8m by 2100, as some scientists forecast in worst-case scenarios, would flood many coastal cities that are home to millions of people around the world, previous research has shown.

For the current study, researchers embarked on the longest-ever assessment of ice mass in the Antarctic, across 18 geographic regions.

Data came from high-resolution aerial photographs taken by NASA planes, along with satellite radar from multiple space agencies.

Researchers discovered that from 1979 to 1990, Antarctica shed an average of 40 billion tonnes of ice mass annually. By the years 2009 to 2017, the ice loss had increased more than six times, to 252 billion tonnes per year.

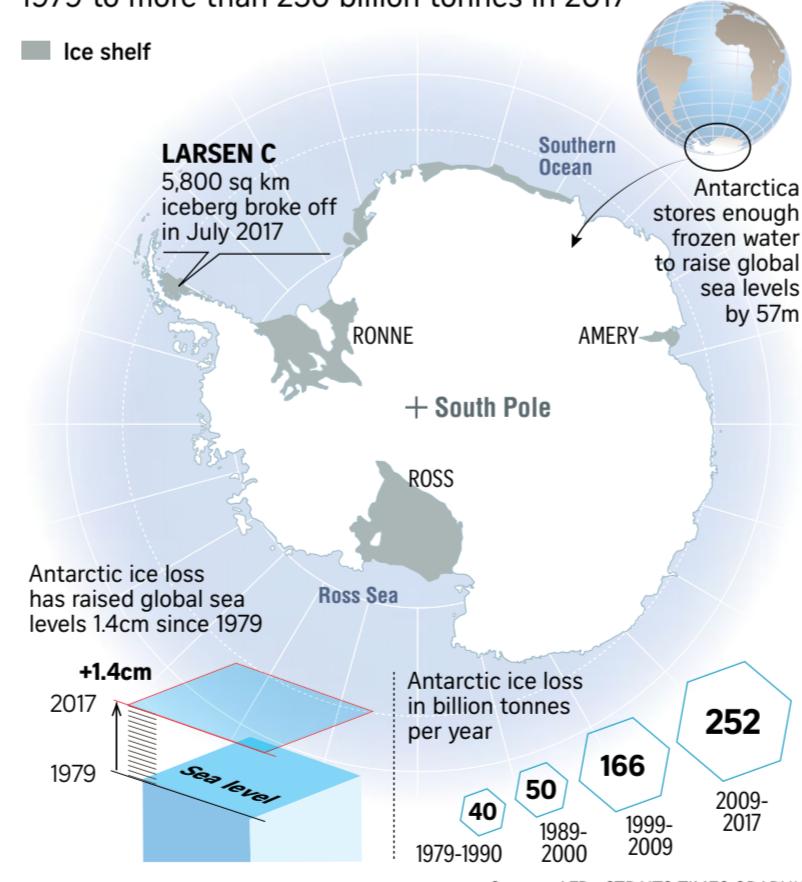
Even more worrying, researchers found that areas that were once considered "stable and immune to change" in East Antarctica are shedding quite a lot of ice too, said the study.

"This region is probably more sensitive to climate than has traditionally been assumed, and that's important to know, because it holds even more ice than West Antarctica and the Antarctic Peninsula together," Mr Rignot said.

The East Antarctic Ice Sheet is the world's largest, containing

Melting away

The rate of ice loss has increased six times since 1979 to more than 250 billion tonnes in 2017



roughly half of earth's fresh water. Until now, most research has shown that the majority of melting is happening in the west.

The latest research shows that East Antarctic melting deserves "closer attention", according to the PNAS report. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Taleban says it is behind Kabul truck bomb attack

KABUL • The Taleban yesterday claimed responsibility for a powerful truck bomb in Kabul that ripped through surrounding neighbourhoods, killing at least four people including an Indian national, and wounding more than 100 in the latest assault on the Afghan capital.

In a grim message, the militants also vowed to carry out more attacks in the city in direct response to the recent appointment of former spymaster and anti-Taleban veteran Amrullah Saleh as interior minister.

The explosion near the heavily fortified Green Village foreign compound on Monday evening shook Kabul and comes as diplomats ramp up efforts to end the 17-year war in Afghanistan, which by some estimates was the world's deadliest conflict last year.

The force of the blast was felt across the sprawling city, initially causing confusion about the exact location of the attack. It shattered the windows of surrounding houses and shops.

Taleban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told journalists on WhatsApp that four attackers blew up an explosives-packed truck before entering Green Village and "killing many" foreigners.

Four people, including three guards and one civilian, have been

confirmed dead and 113 wounded, the Health Ministry said. An Indian national was among those killed, India's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Kabul police spokesman Basir Mujahid said most of the victims were Afghan civilians.

Until recently, some United Nations staff had lived and worked at Green Village, which is heavily protected by cement blast walls.

But Interior Ministry spokesman Najib Danish said earlier the compound was now largely empty and "only a number of guards" were left.

The latest bombing comes as US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad visits the region for further meetings aimed at bringing an end to the war in Afghanistan.

Mr Khalilzad, who met Taleban representatives last month in Abu Dhabi, is travelling to Afghanistan as well as China, India and Pakistan on the trip lasting up till Jan 21.

"As we are trying to reach a regional consensus on peace, the enemy is trying to sabotage it," said National Security Adviser Hamidullah Mohib on social media.

"I strongly condemn this attack and promise I will seriously investigate and avenge it," he added. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Aussie PM on trip to mend fences in Pacific

Landmark visit seen as effort to counter China's growing influence in region

SYDNEY • Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison embarks on a landmark trip to the Pacific today, hoping to mend fences and reassert Australian influence as China makes its presence felt in the region.

He will become the first Australian leader in decades to visit Vanuatu and the first ever to visit Fiji, where he is due to deliver a major speech on Friday.

In the face of increased Chinese influence – and, some suspect, creeping militarism – across the Pacific Islands, Mr Morrison's government has stepped up efforts to secure his country's historic role as a regional power broker.

The trip will be “focused on our security, economic and cultural partnerships”, said Ms Anne Ruston, a junior minister responsible for international development and the Pacific.

Australia is by far the region's largest trade partner and donor – providing quadruple the amount of aid of the next-largest donor, New Zealand – but has seen its influence wane.

In response, Mr Morrison has committed to basing more Australian diplomats in the Pacific, increasing investment and security cooperation, and developing a military base in Papua New Guinea.

Ms Jenny Hayward-Jones, an analyst at the Lowy Institute, an independent think-tank, describes a “sense of panic in Canberra that China's growing influence in the region is now threatening Australian interests”.

In Vanuatu, one topic up for debate will be domestic security, local newspaper the Daily Post reported, suggesting Mr Morrison will open an Australian-backed police training college.

“We are having greater cooperation on police matters,” the paper quoted Vanuatu's Foreign Minister Ralph Regenvanu as saying.

The tiny island chain of just over a quarter of a million people has become an unlikely geopolitical and security hot spot.

Australian and American officials believe Chinese construction and investment on the island includes plans for an eventual military base.

Such a facility could dramatically alter the balance of power in the Pacific, compelling Washington and Canberra to reconsider their force posture – which is currently focused on North-east Asia.

Pacific leaders, well aware of their new-found desirability, are likely to try to leverage competition between powers to gain concessions and investment.

But Mr Morrison's trip has been made more difficult, coming as it does against the backdrop of testy relations between Canberra and the Pacific Islands, with disputes about governance and the importance of tackling climate change.

Australia is among the world's largest polluters per capita and Mr Morrison's centre-right government has downplayed the implementation of climate targets and refused to limit the extraction of coal.

Many Pacific islands see rising sea levels and intensified weather systems as an existential threat and would like Canberra to act.

Facing a difficult election in May, Mr Morrison could struggle to square his domestic and foreign policy agendas. It is “domestic policies that prevent Australia from following through on commitments made to Pacific island countries”, said Ms Hayward-Jones.

To add to the difficulty of Mr Morrison's trip, his government was recently embroiled in an embarrassing dispute with the government of Fiji over its decision to unilaterally cancel the Australian citizenship of suspected Islamic State in Iraq and Syria group operative Neil Prakash on the grounds that he also held Fijian nationality through his father. Fiji denied that Prakash was a citizen.

But Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama played down talk of a rift. He described meeting Mr Morrison in Sydney last year as a “pleasure”, adding: “I look forward to seeing him again here in Fiji this week.” AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



Prime Minister Scott Morrison will become the first Australian leader in decades to visit Vanuatu and the first ever to visit Fiji.
PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Soaring mercury Down Under sparks health alert

SYDNEY • Australians have been warned to avoid exerting themselves outdoors and to drink lots of water as record temperatures in parts of the country look set to linger, and even increase, over the coming days.

Parts of New South Wales, Australia's most populated state, and an area of Western Australia yesterday saw a record-high minimum temperature of 33 deg C overnight.

The maximum temperature is expected to soar above 45 deg C today in parts of New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria, the Bureau of Meteorology said.

“Avoid physical activity, stay well hydrated – it's vital at this time,” said Mr Richard Broome, director of environmental health for the New South Wales state government.

For the four-fifths of Australia's 25 million people who live on the coast, the summer typically means lazing

on the beach and watching cricket. But the unusually high temperatures add to a sense of exhaustion for a farm economy already reeling from a year of drought.

“The weather is not good news for summer grain crops such as sorghum,” said Mr Phin Ziebell, agribusiness economist of the National Australia Bank. “Many east coast farmers are still reeling from the winter wheat crops, which suffered from recent drought.”

Australia, the world's fourth-largest wheat exporter, saw production of the grain fall to a 10-year low this year when dry weather wilted crops.

With unusually dry pasture, the danger of bush fires looms.

Emergency workers were forced to battle more than 100 fires across the north-east coast late last year when unprecedented hot weather triggered a wave of blazes. REUTERS

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House Democrats plan stopgap spending Bills

Efforts to end partial US government shutdown unlikely to win Republican support because of lack of wall funding

WASHINGTON • United States House Democrats have plans for votes on two stopgap spending measures to end the partial government shutdown as a bipartisan group of senators met for the first time to discuss possible ways out of the impasse.

The meeting on Monday did not appear to produce any conclusion, and President Donald Trump has indicated he would not sign a stopgap without the funding he is demanding for a wall on the US border with Mexico, suggesting there is no clear resolution in sight.

Democrats were planning a vote yesterday on a Bill to open the nine closed departments and dozens of agencies till Feb 1.

The Bill will come up under a House procedure requiring support from two-thirds of the chamber – including minority Republicans – to pass it.

Tomorrow, Democrats plan to vote on a Bill to open those shuttered parts of government till Feb 28, according to the text of the Bill posted on a House website.

The measures are unlikely to gain Republican support and advance in the Senate because they do not contain the US\$5.7 billion (\$8.7 billion) in wall funding sought by Mr Trump.

The funding Bills "offer President Trump and Senate Republicans additional options to end the shut-

down while allowing time for negotiation on border security and immigration policy", said Appropriations Committee chairman Nita Lowey, a New York Democrat.

Lawmakers from both parties have been trying – so far without success – to find a compromise.

Senate Republican and Democratic moderates met on Monday afternoon to try to chart a path forward. Among those participating were: Senators Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat; Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona Democrat; Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat; Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican; Rob Portman, an Ohio Republican; Lamar Alexander, a Tennessee Republican; and Susan Collins, a Maine Republican.

Mr Kaine said Democrats argued that the government needs to open before talks about border security take place. "We are not having the discussion until after the government reopens," he said.

Senator John Cornyn of Texas, a Republican leadership team adviser to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, said leaders are willing to consider what the senators come up with.

"Maybe they can come up with some alternatives," he said.

"To me, one thing that's changed is now we have 800,000 federal employees who have missed a pay

cheque. Most people have a hard time living pay cheque to pay cheque, and hopefully they're speaking up and calling their members of Congress and saying, 'Knock this off. Work it out.'

Last week, the House passed four individual appropriations Bills funding the departments of Treasury, Agriculture, Commerce, Justice, Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development.

Those Bills, versions of which had previously passed the Senate on a 92-6 vote, are being blocked by Mr McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, who has said he will not seek a vote on a measure opening the government unless it is backed by Democrats and Mr Trump.

Earlier this month, House Democrats passed a package of six appropriations Bills and a separate stopgap for the Homeland Security Department till Feb 8. Those Bills have also been ignored in the Senate.

Mr Graham, a Trump ally, at the weekend asked Mr Trump to allow the government to open for three weeks while lawmakers debate border security. Mr Trump told reporters on Monday he has rejected that suggestion.

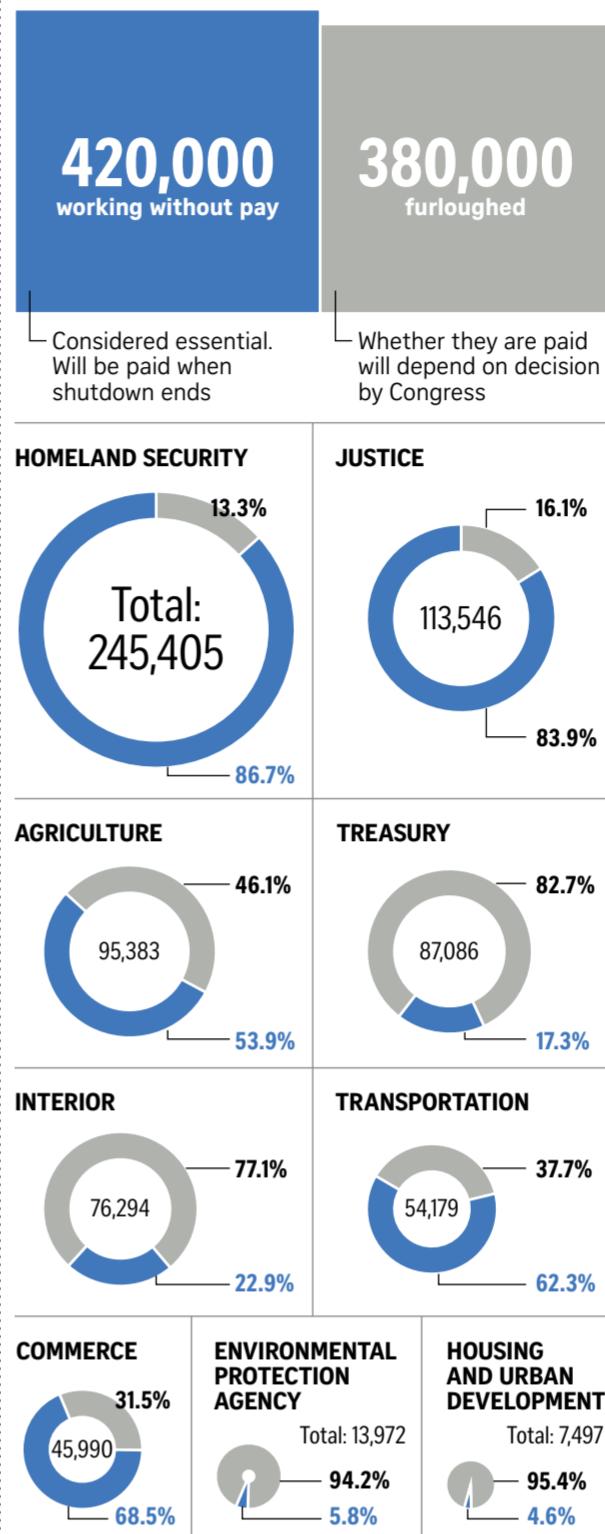
So far, the Democratic Bills have attracted only a handful of House Republican defectors in a sign that the party remains united in supporting Mr Trump on the wall.

Talks between Mr Trump and Democratic leaders collapsed last week after the President walked out of a meeting on the shutdown.

BLOOMBERG

Government workers affected

Nine of the 12 departments and dozens of federal agencies hit



NOTE: Data for State Department not available.

Source: AFP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Japan must recognise disputed Kuril isles as Russian: Moscow

MOSCOW • Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after meeting his Japanese counterpart that Japan must recognise Russia's sovereignty over islands disputed by both countries in order for peace talks to continue.

The two diplomats met for the first time since leaders of the two countries agreed last year to increase efforts to sign a treaty ending World War II.

Talks stalled for decades because of Japan's claim to the disputed islands – known as the South Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan – which were seized by the Soviet army in the final days of World War II.

"Sovereignty over the islands is not up for discussion; this is Russian territory," Mr Lavrov said in a briefing, following talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono.

Moscow is willing to work towards a peace resolution provided Japan recognises "the entirety of results of World War II, including Russia's sovereignty over all of the islands of the southern Kuril chain", he said.

Mr Lavrov said this basic premise is reflected in the 1956 joint declaration of the Soviet Union and Japan, which Moscow is willing to use as a starting point. "This is our base position and, without steps in this direction, it is very difficult to expect movement forward on other issues," he added.

Mr Lavrov said that for the time being, efforts to jointly develop the islands as per recent bilateral agreements have not been particularly successful.

The disputed Kuril islands, one of which lies less than 10km from Japan's Hokkaido island, consist of Kunashir, Iturup, Shikotan and Habomai.

Japan and the Soviet Union signed the 1956 document stipulating that the USSR was willing to cede Shikotan and Habomai following a signed peace agreement, but Japan demanded all four islands.

Mr Lavrov on Monday said it was "unacceptable" that Japan still called the islands Northern Territories in its national law.

In working with the 1956 declaration, Russia would also need to reconcile it with the fact that Japan has since entered into a military alliance with the United States. "Now, of course, we have to take into account that the situation with regard to Japan's military alliances has drastically changed," Mr Lavrov said.

US efforts to "militarise" the Asia-Pacific region created additional risks for Russia, he added.

Unusually, the two foreign ministers did not appear in a joint press conference but scheduled two separate briefings for the media. Mr Lavrov said this was done at Tokyo's request. He said any peace settlement would have to be "supported and accepted by the people in our countries".

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, BLOOMBERG



RUSSIAN STANCE

Sovereignty over the islands is not up for discussion; this is Russian territory... This is our base position and, without steps in this direction, it is very difficult to expect movement forward on other issues.

“

RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER SERGEI LAVROV, on the disputed islands – known as the South Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan.

SHUTDOWN BITES

US President Donald Trump speaking in front of a spread of fast food he ordered for a ceremony honouring the Clemson Tigers football team in the State Dining Room of the White House on Monday. With the US government shutdown, about 800,000 federal employees, including much of the White House residence staff, have been on mandatory leave or working without pay.

PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE



Trump foots bill for fast-food feast

WASHINGTON • With White House residence staff among those hit by the United States government shutdown, President Donald Trump personally ordered in an "all American" feast of burgers and pizza for a visiting football team.

Silver platters were heaped high with McDonald's quarter pounders

and the red-and-white burger wrappers of Wendy's in the State Dining Room on Monday.

White House chefs normally would serve much fancier fare underneath the stern gaze of the room's portrait of Abraham Lincoln. But they are furloughed, staying home without pay cheques as Mr

Trump fights with Congress over funding the federal government.

"Because of the shutdown, as you know... we went out and we ordered American fast food paid for by me," he quipped, as he prepared to play host to the Clemson Tigers university players to celebrate their national championship win.

"I think they'd like it better than anything we could give," said Mr Trump after landing back at the White House following a day trip to

New Orleans. "We have pizzas, we have 300 hamburgers, many, many French fries, all of our favourite foods – I want to see what's here when we leave, because I don't think it's going to be much," he mused.

Asked to name his favourite fast food – as he stood smiling behind the gargantuan spread – Mr Trump demurred, insisting: "If it's American, I like it."

"The reason we did this is be-

cause of the shutdown," he added. "We want to make sure that everything is right, so we sent out, and we got this."

About 800,000 federal employees – including much of the White House residence staff – have been on mandatory leave or working without pay for 24 days as Mr Trump and Congress wrangle over funding for a wall on the southern border with Mexico.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, REUTERS

Turmoil in short-staffed NY jail

NEW YORK • The government shutdown is causing turmoil at the Metropolitan Correctional Centre, a high-security federal jail in Manhattan, where some prisoners went on a hunger strike on Monday after family visits were cancelled for a second time because of staffing shortages, defence lawyers said.

The jail is one of the most important detention centres in the federal prison system, housing about 800 detainees. Inmates have included accused terrorists, prominent white-collar criminals and organised crime figures such as the Mexican drug lord known as El Chapo.

"They have already refused a meal – I believe they refused breakfast and lunch," said Ms Sarah Baumgartel, a federal public defender.

The shutdown has also affected the prescribing and dispensing of medication to some prisoners in the jail.

Ms Serene Gregg, president of a local branch of the American Federation of Government Employees, which represents about 200 correc-

tional workers and other staff at the jail, said the government shutdown had inflamed problems at an already severely short-staffed jail.

Beyond prisoners' social visits, the shutdown is also affecting how criminal justice is administered in the federal courts in New York. For instance, lawyers have been turned away from visiting their clients at a federal jail in Brooklyn.

Mr David Patton, head of the federal defender office, said that as a re-

sult of the restrictions, his office was looking into potential legal remedies, including the possibility of making new bail requests for inmates. The office represents thousands of indigent defendants.

Mr Edward Friedland, a spokesman for the Manhattan federal court, said: "The court is obviously concerned with the impact that the shutdown is having on defence lawyers' ability to see their clients."

NYTIMES

OPINION

THE STRAITS TIMES

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The Straits Times says

Momentum for next Trump-Kim meet

It has now fallen into a pattern that every time he is set for a significant overture towards Washington, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un makes a point of getting advice from China ahead of the meeting. His latest trip, apparently coinciding with his 35th birthday, saw the Kim dynasty travel in a special bullet-proof train on a 20-hour trip to Beijing, during which he met Chinese President Xi Jinping twice. Since his first, surprise visit to the Chinese capital in March last year, this is the third time he has travelled to China. Smaller nations typically tend to be more mindful of the principle of reciprocity in bilateral relations, but this has not seemed to matter to Mr Kim, given that Mr Xi has yet to visit Pyongyang. In any case, a

second summit meeting between Mr Kim and US President Donald Trump seems to be on the cards, at a venue and date yet to be disclosed.

Beijing seems to endorse this. The Xinhua news agency quoted Mr Xi as saying he supported further dialogue and hoped Pyongyang and Washington would "meet each other halfway". Since Washington demands complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of the North's nuclear programme and Pyongyang, in turn, seeks a phased denuclearisation in tandem with the lifting of economic sanctions, it is not clear where Beijing sees the middle line. Nevertheless, China's backing is significant. The complications arise from the vagueness of the agreement that the US

and North Korea signed at their historic first summit in Singapore last June. The second paragraph of that document contained a vague declaration that Mr Trump "committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK, and Chairman Kim Jong Un reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula". To Mr Kim's ears, this sounded like the promise of a peace treaty to replace the armistice of 1953. Denuclearising the Korean peninsula could also be taken to mean that all nuclear weapons – including those presumably in US hands – will be removed from the region.

In his New Year's Day address, Mr Kim denounced South Korean military exercises with

foreign forces as "the source of the situation" on the peninsula and called for an end to the introduction of "war equipment, including strategic assets, from outside". He warned that the North could be forced to take a new path unless the US eased sanctions and made security guarantees. Now that Beijing has signalled that it has Mr Kim's back, many will be looking to see what Mr Trump's response is. He could threaten to walk away, and risk upsetting ally South Korea as well, or adjust his position and accommodate Mr Kim, at least in part. But there must be some give from Pyongyang too if the engagement process that began last year is to move forward and not become just another photo opportunity.

Economic Affairs

Picking the World Bank chief: Contest needed, not coronation

For too long, realpolitik and US strategic interests have dominated who gets the job.



Vikram Khanna

Associate Editor

The top job at the World Bank is unexpectedly up for grabs. Out of the blue, its incumbent president, the Korean-American Jim Yong Kim announced his resignation on Jan 7, saying he will step down on Feb 1 to join a private equity firm. He is leaving with more than three years remaining till the end of his second term.

The resulting vacancy has raised a big question: Will Dr Kim's successor be an American male, for the 13th time in a row?

There is a loud chorus of voices saying this should not be allowed to happen. It is beyond time to end the 73-year US monopoly on the leadership of the world's top development institution, they say. The next president of the World Bank should be chosen on merit rather than by preordained convention or a "gentleman's agreement". They make a strong case, which has been made several times before.

In 2011, the World Bank's 25-member board introduced a new appointment process designed to address such concerns. The process would be "open, transparent and merit-based", irrespective of nationality, it said.

NO CONTEST

This has never happened. Past presidents of the bank have been shoo-ins, with not even the pretence of a contest.

Dr Kim's case was only slightly different. He was nominated to head the World Bank by the Obama administration in 2011.

Development experts did not consider him to be well qualified for the job. He was trained as a medical doctor and anthropologist and had little administrative or financial experience other than being the head of an American liberal arts college.

Although earnest and driven, by all accounts he did not distinguish himself at the bank.

He launched a radical

reorganisation, slashing some 500 jobs and clashing with senior staff, who viewed him as capricious and authoritarian.

To the surprise and dismay of development professionals and the World Bank staff, he was

renominated for a second five-year term in 2016, a rarity – it had happened only twice in the bank's history. That year, the leadership was contested.

Two highly respected candidates also applied for the job, with resumes far more impressive than Dr Kim's. They were Nigeria's former finance minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Colombia's former minister for finance and economy as well as agriculture Jose Antonio Ocampo, both of whom had dealt with the bank and knew at first hand how it worked.

In a letter to the board in August 2016 – just before the selection – the World Bank Staff Association pleaded that the process be open and fair. "Staff and clients of the World Bank Group alike demand nothing less than the best the world can offer," it said, noting that "diversity of background and nationality is at the core of what makes the World Bank Group".

In a sharp indictment of Dr Kim's performance as president, it added: "Our annual Employee Engagement Survey has, for two years running, made it painfully clear that the World Bank Group is experiencing a crisis of leadership."

But after a brief process, hastily pushed through in the twilight of the Obama administration, Dr Kim prevailed. The result was greeted with outrage, from both within the bank and outside.

This is what a letter to The Financial Times on Sept 14, 2016, signed by 41 people, said: "We are former senior officials of the World Bank writing to express our deep concern about the shameful action of governments around the world in bypassing good governance and transparency in the selection of the next president of the World Bank..."

Heavy lobbying by the US to reverse early voting that favoured the non-US candidate resulted in the appointment of Dr Jim Yong Kim... The process is deeply flawed and flies in the face of the criteria established in 2011."

THE CASE FOR A FAIR SELECTION

When the World Bank was founded in 1945, the case for an American president was compelling. More than one-third of the capital for the bank came from the US. But over the decades, as more members joined (today there are 189) and contributed to the bank's coffers, the US share was diluted. Today it stands at around 16 per cent.

So on the basis of shareholding, the case for an American World Bank president is no longer what it was.

The bank's clientele has also changed. Whereas at its founding, its main mandate was to finance



the reconstruction of post-war Europe, today, its main focus is tackling poverty-related issues, and almost all the bank's clients are low- and middle-income developing countries which make up the majority of its membership.

Development experts and non-governmental organisations argue that given the bank's focus, it needs a leader who has a strong understanding and experience of the problems facing the developing world. Only such a leader would be seen as credible and legitimate, both by its clients and the majority of its shareholders.

So, to the question of where the president of the World Bank should come from, Dr Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics and former chief economist at the bank, had a persuasive answer: "Since expertise on development by and large lies within the emerging and developing countries – after all, they live development – it seems natural that the World Bank's head would come from one of those countries."

Why has this never happened? The bank's clientele has also changed. Whereas at its founding, its main mandate was to finance

REALPOLITIK WINS

The core of the problem is that issues of governance and legitimacy have been trumped by realpolitik. While in theory the process for selecting the World Bank president – and the same can be said for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) managing director – is transparent, open and fair, in practice, backroom deals dominate the process.

The biggest of these is a tacit agreement between Europe and the US whereby Europe will back the US nominee to head the World Bank, while the US will back Europe's nominee to lead the IMF (all of whose heads have been European).

Emerging economies are cajoled or coerced to back the US/European choice.

As Dr Stiglitz explains, they "obtain an IOU, to be cashed in for something that is more important". So, merit, openness and transparency go out of the window. But this begs the question: Why are the US and Europe so keen to keep a lock on the leadership of the

World Bank and IMF?

According to development experts, this is because these organisations are used as tools of statecraft.

One recent example is what happened in Ukraine after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Mr Scott Morris of the Centre for Global Development, who has researched multilateral institutions, pointed out that the US rallied European allies to use the World Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development to make big loans to the pro-Western government in Kiev.

New lending to Ukraine amounted to nearly US\$5 billion (\$6.8 billion) for 2014 and 2015, triple the assistance given before the annexation.

Mr Morris cites lending to Myanmar as another recent example. In this case, the US used the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (where it is the largest shareholder, jointly with Japan) as part of its broader efforts to "rebalance the country's relationships away from China". By

2017, the World Bank and Asian Development Bank emerged jointly as the second-largest donors to Myanmar, after Japan and well ahead of China.

Iraq was another case in point. Under Dr Paul Wolfowitz, one of the masterminds behind the US invasion of Iraq who became World Bank president for two years from June 2005, the anti-corruption agenda of the bank "became politicised", according to Dr Stiglitz. "There was a push to give money to Iraq – a country rife with corruption – while other countries were accused of corruption without adequate hard evidence or specific details."

There are many other examples over the years of the World Bank and other multilateral institutions being used for strategic purposes by their biggest shareholders, in defiance of economic logic, fairness or even humanitarian considerations.

A REAL CONTEST

So what will happen with the World Bank's leadership contest this time? Who will be Dr Kim's successor?

While the Trump administration is hardly a fan of either foreign aid in general or the bank (although it did consent to a US\$13 billion capital increase for the institution last year), it is difficult to imagine that it would fight to ensure that an American continues to lead the institution.

But an "America First" candidate is unlikely to win the support of the developing world or even the Europeans. This may work for Cabinet appointments in America, but not at the World Bank, where a multinational board has the final say. If such a candidate is put forward, it is likely that, for the first time, a non-American will be chosen as president.

On the other hand, a credible US candidate would, in many ways, be an antithesis of what the Trump administration stands for.

He or she would, for example, have to support the bank's agenda to finance climate change, which the Trump administration deplores; cooperate with China-led development banks such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (which partners the World Bank in many projects) at a time when the US is at loggerheads with China; and win the support of civil society – a constituency unfriendly, and often hostile, to the Trump administration.

The potential candidates for the World Bank's top job could again include Nigeria's Dr Okonjo-Iweala and Colombia's Dr Ocampo, who contested against Dr Kim in 2016. The American names making the rounds include Treasury Undersecretary for International Affairs David Malpass, former US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley and even President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka, who championed a US\$1 billion World Bank fund to promote entrepreneurship by women, which has come to be known as the "Ivanka Fund".

The stage is therefore set for an intriguing and unusual contest, which will be decided by mid-April.

Maybe an American candidate will prevail yet again. But this time, the process is likely to be a real contest, not a coronation like in the past. Which is how it should be.

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Over 40 countries have meaningful taxes or levies on sugary drinks, often imposed on manufacturers and importers, rather than on consumers directly, the writer says. ST FILE PHOTO

Hitting the sweet spot in reducing the appeal of sugary drinks

Ng Shu Wen

For The Straits Times

Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) and Health Promotion Board have formulated a multi-pronged plan to tackle sugar intake as part of their multi-sectoral "War on Diabetes".

This war is a real and urgent one as Singapore has the dubious honour of having the highest prevalence of diabetes among high-income countries in the world. Nearly one in seven Singaporeans has diabetes. Statistics aside, there are real implications for the earnings potential and well-being of those afflicted as well as their caregivers.

As an overseas Singaporean who has spent over a decade studying the etiology, health and economic consequences of diet-related chronic diseases around the world, I believe this move by the Government is a critical step.

The proposed measures focused on sugary drinks will begin to help Singaporeans more easily choose healthier options by encouraging manufacturers to improve their product offerings as well as further educating the public.

Few countries have taken such a thoughtful and integrated strategy proposed by MOH.

The measures proposed on sugary drinks cover mandatory front-of-pack labelling, advertising regulations, an excise duty on manufacturers and importers, and a nationwide ban on the sale of higher-sugar drinks.

As with any policy, the details are what matter, and the public health community is learning lessons from elsewhere that may provide insights into how the details for each of these measures might matter.

Let's look at Chile as an example. In June 2016, Chile began implementing a first-of-its-kind policy that combined four measures.

First, to better inform consumers, the Chilean government mandated that any foods or beverages exceeding a certain level of sugar, sodium, saturated fat, or calories must carry a warning label identifying what is in excess.

Second, to counteract the aggressive marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children, products carrying the warning label are prohibited from using any licensed or brand character, toy,

giveaway or child-targeted imagery.

Third, unhealthy products that carry warning labels cannot be advertised on television or websites aimed at children, with the advertising ban expanded in 2017 to cover all TV and movie cinema screenings between 6am and 10pm.

Finally, Chilean law also bans the availability of unhealthy products that carry warning labels at pre-school, kindergarten and school settings.

The results from rigorous independent scientific evaluations of these measures are now beginning to be reported.

Preliminary results from Chile's integrated approach show that more than 90 per cent of consumers understand front-of-package labels on beverages and foods with "high in" labels that indicate which ingredients are in excess.

Also, it was found that children had 46 to 62 per cent lower exposure to ads for unhealthy products; sugary drink purchases fell by 25 per cent and high sugar breakfast cereal purchases fell by 14 per cent. The industry has also responded by reformulating its products to avoid the labels.

The Chilean example demonstrates that with political will and public support, it is possible to pass and implement these important policies not just on sugary drinks but also on food products high in these nutrients of concern that have been linked with other chronic diseases besides diabetes, including hypertension, cardiovascular and heart disease, and some cancers.

Other countries are taking note and following suit. Peru and Uruguay have already passed similar mandatory front-of-package warning labels and are in the process of also implementing them, while many other countries are considering adopting similar approaches.

At the same time, the Chilean example provides insights on loopholes that should be plugged. For example, increasingly, children's media exposure goes beyond TV and movies. Unhealthy beverage and food marketing is ubiquitous and greatly influences children and their caregivers' preferences.

There is thus a need to consider all other forms of unhealthy beverage and food marketing (for example, sponsorship of events,

product placements in shows) across all platforms (for example, social media, Internet banner ads, radio, video games).

As a result, a blanket ban on beverages and foods that do not meet a set nutritional criterion may be the more effective approach.

Importantly, this would also incentivise manufacturers to lower the nutrients of concern such as sugar content in their products in order to be able to advertise them.

Another well-studied and effective approach to change consumer and industry behaviour is the use of fiscal policies. Over 40 countries now have meaningful taxes or levies on sugary drinks, often imposed on manufacturers and importers, rather than on consumers directly.

Earlier tax designs such as in Mexico and in various parts of the

United States were based on volume – for example, one peso (seven Singapore cents) per litre in Mexico, one US cent (1.4 Singapore cents) per 29.6ml in Berkeley, California. In Mexico, after the tax on sugary drinks was implemented, Mexicans significantly lowered their sugary drink purchases (average of 10 per cent in the first two years of the tax) and increased their water purchases. Importantly, the reductions were more pronounced among lower-income and high-volume consumers, thus achieving health benefits among the two groups with the greatest health risk.

Some of the more recent levies on sugary drinks are based on sugar content with the expressed intent to encourage manufacturers to lower the sugar content of their products.

In April last year, the United Kingdom implemented a two-tiered levy on manufacturers of sugary drinks, with higher-sugar drinks paying a higher levy than lower-sugar drinks. This sets tiered targets for manufacturers to reformulate, and preliminary findings suggest that it is working.

Many manufacturers in the UK reduced sugar in their drinks to avoid or reduce their payable levy.

This gives consumers a larger variety of lower-sugar options to choose from and proves that such sugar reductions are possible and palatable from a food technology standpoint.

The evidence is now coming together to suggest that an integrated approach with strong nutritional criteria applied across a suite of measures will send a clear and consistent message to consumers and industry.

Singapore's high prevalence of diabetes, hypertension and heart disease did not occur overnight, so efforts to tackle and reverse these problems will also take time and will require action from various angles.

Singapore's high prevalence of diabetes, hypertension and heart disease did not occur overnight, so efforts to tackle and reverse these problems will also take time and will require action from various angles.

Other stakeholders including academics, healthcare professionals and the public should also step up to give their comments during the MOH public consultation period on its measures (which ends on Jan 25), as we go into battle against the scourge of diabetes together.

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Why Wikipedia at 18 is gaining trust online

Stephen Harrison

Yesterday, Wikipedia celebrated its 18th birthday. If the massive crowdsourced encyclopaedia project were human, then in most countries, it would now be considered a legal adult.

But in truth, the free online encyclopaedia has long played the role of the Internet's good grown-up.

Wikipedia has grown enormously since its inception: It now boasts 5.7 million articles in English and pulled in 92 billion page views last year.

The site has also undergone a major reputation change.

If you ask Siri, Alexa or Google Home a general knowledge question, it will likely pull the response from Wikipedia.

The online encyclopaedia has been cited in more than 400 judicial opinions, according to a 2010 paper in the Yale Journal of Law and Technology.

Many professors are ditching the traditional writing assignment and instead asking students to expand or create a Wikipedia article on the topic.

And YouTube chief executive Susan Wojcicki announced a plan last March to pair misleading conspiracy videos with links to corresponding articles from Wikipedia. Facebook has also released a feature using Wikipedia's content to provide users more information about the publication source for articles in their feed.

Wikipedia's rise is driven by a crucial difference in values that separates it from its peers in the top 10 websites: On Wikipedia, truth trumps self-expression.

Last year, Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales told NPR, a media organisation, that Wikipedia has largely avoided the "fake news" problem, raising the question of what the encyclopaedia does differently than other popular websites.

As Mr Brian Feldman suggested in New York magazine, perhaps it's simply the willingness within the Wikipedia community to delete. If a user posts bad information on Wikipedia, other users are authorised and empowered to remove that unencyclopaedic content.

It's a striking contrast to Twitter, which allows lies and inflammatory statements to remain on its platform for years.

The Wikipedia community has also embraced automated technologies to protect the integrity of the encyclopaedia.

While YouTube scans videos for potential content violations using its Content ID database, the community of Wikipedia editors has created editing bots that go further by making determinations about content quality.

For example, ClueBot NG quickly reverts probable vandalism based on its machine-learning algorithm and a database of common indicators such as expletives and poor punctuation.

In 2016, YouTube courted controversy for attempting to enforce its policy against inappropriate language, with many vloggers alleging censorship.

But a civility requirement makes sense for Wikipedians because the community shares a vision: to build a better encyclopaedia.

Every generation's encyclopaedists face adversaries – in the 18th century, French philosopher Denis Diderot and other authors of the Encyclopédie were denounced as heretics.

Today's Wikipedians confront serious challenges: an often hostile editing environment with regular editors who "bite" the newbies, a long-term decline in the contributor community, bad actors who hack administrator accounts to vandalise pages, and an overall systemic bias in its coverage, caused in part by a contributor base that's mostly Western and male.

Gender bias on Wikipedia received media attention last year when Canadian physicist Donna Strickland won a Nobel Prize, and – at the time of her award – did not have a Wikipedia page. (An earlier entry on Professor Strickland had been rejected due to lack of "notability".)

Ms Katherine Maher, executive director of the nonprofit Wikimedia Foundation, responded with a commentary observing that the encyclopaedia mirrors, but does not cause, the world's biases.

It is worth emphasising, however, how the volunteer Wikipedia community is gradually moving the needle. The volunteer group WikiProject Women in Red, co-founded by Ms Rosie Stephenson-Goodknight and Mr Roger Bamkin in 2015, has committed to reduce the site's gender gap and has already increased the percentage of female biographies from about 15 to 17.8.

Do-it-yourself initiatives such as AfroCROWD and Art+Feminism host edit-a-thons, organised public events where volunteers help improve the encyclopaedia's coverage of under-represented groups.

Meanwhile, YouTube stars are making millions on video games and Instagram influencers are posting fake sponsored content to attract sponsors.

Outside the Wiki bubble, the Internet glares with adolescent self-promotion.

Contrast those commercial stars with Mr Jim Henderson, 70, who has spent the past 12 years biking the boroughs of New York and snapping photographs for Wikipedia.

As reported by the Queens Daily Eagle, Mr Henderson has uploaded thousands of original photos, where they have greatly helped community news coverage. He devotes his time on a volunteer basis, for the public benefit, and without expecting compensation or social media likes.

Millennials coined the word "adulting" to describe mundane acts of grown-up self-sufficiency. But perhaps the term could be expanded to include moral maturity and repeated contributions towards the common good. As Wikipedia crosses this milestone this week, it is worth acknowledging that – at its best – its community has long been adulting, the contributors modelling a selflessness that's increasingly rare online. WASHINGTON POST

• Stephen Harrison is working on a book about the Wikipedia-editing community.



A helicopter landing on the Izumo-class "helicopter-carrying destroyer". Japan plans to equip its two Izumo warships to operate the F-35B, the short take-off and vertical landing, or "jump jet", variant of one of the world's most advanced stealth fighters. But buying the jets is costly and Japan has a long list of other expensive defence priorities. PHOTO: REUTERS

Japan's aircraft carriers – white elephants or all-purpose Swiss knives?

Nick Childs and William Choong

For The Straits Times

Last month, Japan revealed one of the worst-kept secrets in global naval circles – its two largest warships, the Izumo-class "helicopter-carrying destroyers", as it has insisted on referring to them, are to all intents and purposes light aircraft carriers.

Of course, Japan still fights shy of calling them aircraft carriers. But it has confirmed that it plans to equip them to operate the F-35B, the short take-off and vertical landing, or "jump jet", variant of one of the

world's most advanced stealth fighters.

The coyness over terminology is not surprising, given Japan's wartime history and most people's view of aircraft carriers as the archetypal power-projection tool.

Concern over regional reactions is also why Tokyo has been so reluctant to acknowledge that this development has long been on the cards, not least because of the general trend of growing naval capabilities in the region, and especially the dramatic rise of China as a naval power. Indeed, it has been reported that the Izumos were designed from the outset in the 2000s with the F-35B in mind.

What then are observers to make of Japan's decision to convert the two destroyers to F-35B carriers?

What purpose do they serve? First, it should be noted that carriers come in different shapes and sizes. These ships are not comparable to a US super-carrier, with its multiple squadrons able to launch scores of sorties a day on defensive and strike missions. The Izumo vessels do not have the traditional carrier paraphernalia of catapults and arrester wires for launching and landing aircraft at sea. That is why they are limited to the jump jet F-35B.

One of the main tasks of the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) is to defend the country's sea-lanes out to 1,000 nautical miles.

With the F-35B at sea, the JMSDF will be able to protect itself and Japanese shipping more effectively beyond the range of land-based air cover, against China's array of aircraft armed with anti-ship missiles and Beijing's own future carrier-based naval formations. The planes will also be able to support forces on Japan's remote islands, including, if necessary, as a bomber (the F-35B has just made its debut in that role in Afghanistan, operating from a US Navy amphibious assault carrier).

These attributes inevitably mean it will bring a limited power-projection potential as well. The JMSDF will be able to take air power to sea and, if called upon, operate independently at greater range from the home islands than at any other time in the recent past, pushing the boundaries of what Japan can do just a bit more.

STRATEGIC MESSAGING

Depending on events, this may be most valuable in situations short of full-on conflict, when strategic messaging is the priority. Both the Izumos have carried out significant deployments in the past couple of years, including into the Indian Ocean.

During its 2018 deployment, the second ship of the class, JS Kaga, carried out joint exercises with five navies: India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Singapore. The most high-end exercises were conducted with the Indian Navy. These involved anti-submarine warfare, live firing, cross-deck helicopter operations and anti-air threat scenarios.

The messaging may be all the more potent in the future, knowing the ships could be carrying F-35Bs as well.

But is this worth it, given that this will not be cheap?

A lot may have been done already to prepare the ships to host the new jets. But more modifications will be needed.

Buying the jets is costly: Japan is aiming for 42 F-35Bs, which cost more than US\$100 million (\$135 million) a plane. And Japan has a long list of other expensive defence priorities to meet the challenges from China and North Korea, including hypersonic weapons, ballistic missile defences, electronic warfare systems and cyber defences.

VALUE FOR MONEY?

And surely aircraft carriers are white elephants now, given their cost and supposed vulnerability with the spread of potent long-range, anti-ship missiles and especially in the age of Chinese "carrier-killer" missiles.

Life is certainly more difficult for carriers now and, indeed, warships more generally. They are having to learn to operate differently, with beefed-up defences.

But, even in today's world of ever-greater surveillance and information overload, targeting them is more difficult than many detractors would have people believe. China's carrier-killer missiles are themselves an unproven weapon.

Moreover, F-35Bs were built to circumvent contingencies where carriers are taken out of action.

China's anti-access, area-denial strategy seeks to deter enemy forces from operating near Chinese waters by targeting their airbases or aircraft carriers.

The F-35Bs are built to land anywhere, such as dirt surfaces. US Marines in Japan have been training on Nasar pitstop-style tactics such as "hot loading" and "hot refuelling", seeking to refuel and reload bombs onto F-35Bs on dirt surfaces with minimal support infrastructure.

Of course, China itself is also building aircraft carriers. And navies are finding that large ships with long flight decks continue to prove themselves useful and flexible tools in a wide variety of situations.

DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Adding jets to the Izumos, while pricey, will increase the options open to the JMSDF for using what are already expensive vessels, as well as improve their ability to look after themselves.

In many ways, this is a double-edged sword, as the Izumos risk being pulled in multiple different directions – to hunt submarines with helicopters as originally planned, to defend shipping against air attack, for island defence, and potentially long-range power projection as well. And there are only two of them.

Maybe that will get planners to start thinking about what might be done with two earlier, somewhat smaller, but otherwise quite similar ships known as the Hyuga class.

Paradoxically, given the challenges posed by China's missile developments, in particular, there is growing interest in boosting carrier capabilities in the region. As well as the United States and China, India is pursuing its ambition to field three carriers. The Americans are also bound to supplement their big Nimitz-class carriers with increasing numbers of F-35Bs on their amphibious assault ships.

South Korea is also looking at putting F-35Bs on its amphibious flat-tops. If it were not for the price tag, Australia would no doubt dearly like to do the same. France and Britain are both eyeing deployments of their carriers to the region. All this may ease the path for Japan's plans.

Japan may have been guilty of a "necessary deceit" in the way that it has brought these ships into service. It is certainly not the first to do something like this. There are parallels with the Royal Navy Invincible-class light carriers in the 1980s.

In the face of anti-carrier sentiment in Whitehall at the time, the Invincibles were originally described as "cruisers" and slated to carry only helicopters. But the Royal Navy then made the case to buy a small number of Sea Harrier jump jets (the F-35B's forebear) for limited self-defence against Russian aircraft. HMS Invincible had barely entered service before she was off to help recapture the Falkland Islands. All the ships performed various air policing and power projection missions in the Balkans, the Gulf, Sierra Leone and even Afghanistan in the 1990s and early 2000s. This is not the end of the story by any means for Japan and its Izumos.

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Dubai looks to university 'free zones' to future-proof its economy

Jonathan Gornall

What, exactly, is higher education for? It's a question that few pause to consider in an age when education to university level is not only regarded as virtually mandatory, but has also become a significant source of income for many economies.

It is also a question that is raised, indirectly, by the publication of a charter by the government in Dubai earlier this month that sets out nine pledges designed to improve the quality of life for future generations.

Some of these pledges, touching on issues from healthcare, investment and economic goals to self-sufficiency in water, food and energy, are natural extensions of the forward-thinking philosophy that has seen Dubai propelled from sleepy backwater to vibrant global entrepot in under a lifetime.

But as exciting as some of these plans are, it is in the proposed

development of economic "free zones" attached to universities that Dubai's ongoing commitment to future-proofing its citizens is most intriguingly evident.

Article 6 of the nine-point charter recognises a potential flaw in the burgeoning of the education sector, and sets out to correct it. "The end goal," it states, should not be "only graduating students but also coming up with companies".

In other words, it's all very well to educate citizens to the highest level. But if there are no jobs for graduates, all that has been achieved is the creation of a highly educated class of unemployed, with all that portends for social disruption.

Starting next year, Dubai intends to create economic free zones alongside private and national universities "to support students in education, research and finance while setting up their businesses". This, in other words, will be education with a tightly defined and facilitated purpose.

Dubai's initiative is one of many in a United Arab Emirates (UAE) strivings energetically to transform itself into a post-oil knowledge economy in which skilled citizens, rather than imported talent, will play an increasingly central role.

Within days, the announcement was followed by a study from the Ministry of Education, based on the experience of 13,000 graduates, identifying which degrees were most in demand in the job market among those who graduated in 2017.

The message to the nation's schools was clear: Steer students into subjects that will benefit the development and economic well-being of the nation.

There is a note of caution to be sounded. Not everyone wants to be an engineer or a contract lawyer when he grows up, and individual hopes and dreams must not be trampled in the rush to fulfil the national destiny.

The UAE should take care to ensure that the society it is so

deliberately shaping is a balanced one, in which citizens' lives are enriched as much by art and culture as they are by economic success.

That said, there can be no arguing with the fact that financial stability is the basic foundation that must be in place if the UAE is to leave oil behind and successfully face the challenges of the future as a knowledge-based economy. And Dubai's plan to revitalise its education sector as an engine of growth is a bold step in that direction.

The ambitious scheme is a radical development of a successful model already in action in individual universities around the world, but which has never before been applied to an entire national education system.

Proof of concept can be found at the University of Cambridge, which in 2006 formed Cambridge Enterprise "to help staff and students commercialise their expertise and ideas", which it does by offering help to staff and

students in business creation, consultancy and intellectual property management.

Last financial year alone, Cambridge Enterprise supported 1,714 researchers, filed 276 patents, generated 349 consultancy contracts, invested £5.2 million (\$9 million) in spin-off companies and won £13 million in seed funding for university clients.

Dubai doubtless also has an eye on the success story that is Stanford University. Stanford blazed a trail with the construction of Stanford Research Park, which became a hotbed of research and development that spawned an entrepreneurial culture, generated income for the university and kick-started Silicon Valley.

Not that Dubai requires much instruction in entrepreneurship. Lacking oil wealth, from the outset it was obliged to build its own fortune, business venture by business venture.

Today, 90 per cent of Dubai's

income comes from commercial activities, many linked to the shipping, aviation and tourism sectors it developed in the face of much contemporary scepticism, and which today are world-leading enterprises.

As Dubai has clearly recognised, a country that equips its graduates to think and act like entrepreneurs is a country that is investing in its future in the most practical way. It is an example that other economies in the region, also facing the inevitable end of oil, would do well to follow.

In the past, Dubai has always made its own luck. Now, in finely defining the objectives of its entire higher education system, it is also taking care not to leave its future to chance.

• This article was first published by the Syndication Bureau. Jonathan Gornall is a British journalist, formerly with The Times, who has lived and worked in the Middle East and is now based in Britain.



WEATHER

Windy, with passing showers
in the afternoon.

High 34 deg C Low 24 deg C

24-hr PSI as of 5pm yesterday: 43 to 52 (Moderate)

BIG PICTURE



PHOTO: EPA-EFE

Panda snuggles into cool position

In the middle of South Korea's Everland amusement park sits Panda World, the country's only panda enclosure.

On the 1,000th day of its opening yesterday, visitors were treated to the sight of this panda cosily

snuggling in the snow.

Located in Yongin, about 50km south of Seoul, Panda World offers visitors a chance to meet two giant pandas, Ai Bao and Le Bao, which were gifted to South Korea by China in 2016.

Often, visitors are unable to see the pandas in action as they tend to move less when it gets warmer, and they are scared by loud noises.

However, the park offers visitors more than just the chance to see these pandas.

Using advanced technology, Panda World offers an integrative experience for all – upon entry, visitors are treated to a 360-degree animated panda video, while touch-screens are installed throughout the experience hall.

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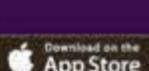


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Plunge in new private home sales in December

Best-selling projects in December 2018

Project name	Units sold in the month	Median price (\$psf)	Lowest price (\$psf)	Highest price (\$psf)
Parc Esta	160	1,687	1,530	1,858
Whistler Grand	128	1,327	1,228	1,575
Riverfront Residences	47	1,313	1,167	1,432
Park Colonial	43	1,729	1,374	1,999
Stirling Residences	34	1,745	1,539	1,954

Source: URA, HUTTONS STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS



Prospective buyers at the Riverfront Residences showroom in July last year, just before the July 6 cooling measures kicked in. The development in Hougang was among the top-selling new home projects last month.
ST FILE PHOTO

Absence of new launches and typical year-end marketing slowdown cited as factors, but figure up 40% from a year ago, URA data shows

Grace Leong
Business Correspondent

Developers in Singapore sold 602 private homes last month, about half the 1,201 units they moved in November, due to the absence of new project launches and the typical slowdown in marketing activity during the year-end holidays.

The figures were released by the Urban Redevelopment Authority yesterday based on its survey of licensed housing developers.

A total of 101 private homes from existing launches were released last month - down 92 per cent from the bumper 1,342 units in November, and down 56 per cent from the 231 units released in December 2017. This is the lowest number of new private homes launched since September 2017, JLL senior director of research and consultancy Ong Teck Hui noted.

Of the 101 units launched, 100 were from Affinity at Serangoon, OrangeTee & Tie research and consultancy head Christine Sun noted.

But there is a silver lining. The number of units sold last month - 602 excluding executive condominium (EC) units - was quite encouraging, up nearly 40 per cent from the 431 units sold in December 2017.

ber 2017. It was the highest sales done in the month of December since 1,410 units were sold in December 2012, Ms Tricia Song, Colliers' head of research for Singapore, noted.

Meanwhile, only three new EC units were sold in December last year. But the entire year saw 628 new EC units launched and 1,137 sold. Said Mr Ong: "The supply and demand imbalance caused median prices to jump nearly 25 per cent from \$793 per sq ft (psf) in the fourth quarter of 2017 to \$989 psf in the fourth quarter last year."

Among the top-selling new home projects last month were Parc Esta along Sims Ave and Whistler Grand along West Coast Vale. Other top sellers - Riverfront Residences in Hougang, Park Colonial in Upper Serangoon, Stirling Residences, and The Tapestry in Tampines - are "seeing total sell-through at 40-65 per cent, while holding prices steady at \$1,313-\$1,745 psf", Ms Song said.

While high land prices are likely to support new home prices, the latest round of cooling measures, higher financing costs and tighter financing requirements will likely cap price growth at a more moderate pace, said Mr Desmond Sim, CBRE's head of research, Singapore & South-east Asia.

Last year, developers launched 8,773 private new homes, up from 6,020 units a year ago. They sold 9,264 units (excluding EC units), down from 10,566 units in 2017.

But things are not too dire. About 40 per cent of developer sales were transacted in the last five months of last year, indicating encouraging demand despite the July 6 cooling measures, more curbs on shoebox units being built in certain locations, rising interest rates, and the

ongoing trade spat, Ms Sun said.

About 5,415 units were launched in the second half of last year, 61 per cent more than in the first half. This is partly due to expectations of a large launch supply hitting the market this year. Mr Ong expects the launch momentum to carry over into this year when 10,000 to 12,000 new private homes could be launched. Among them are Fourth Avenue Residences in Bukit Timah, Fyve Derbyshire along Derbyshire

Road, and RV Altitude along River Valley Road, which began previews this month and will be launched in the coming weeks.

While sales are expected to remain subdued ahead of Chinese New Year, launches are likely to pick up after that, with The Florence Residences in Kovan and Treasure@Tampines expected to launch in the first quarter.

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602

Number of private units - excluding EC units - sold last month, up nearly 40 per cent from the 431 units sold in December 2017.

Club Street hotel site draws top bid of \$562m

A plum hotel site along Club Street in the Central Business District drew interest from hotel groups in Singapore and the region, resulting in a record price being set for 99-year leasehold land at a state tender.

The eight bids were short of the dozen or more some market watchers had been expecting, but the top bid of \$562.2 million, by Worldwide Hotels Group's Midtown Development, translates to \$2,148.50 per sq ft per plot ratio (psf ppr), the highest for a 99-year leasehold site offered in a Government Land Sales tender, said analysts.

However, in the housing land segment, it was a tale of two cities.

The top bid for a private housing site in Kampong Java Road near Newton MRT station, \$418.38 million or \$578.12 psf ppr, came in below market expectations, reflecting the caution setting in among developers amid the current supply-demand imbalance.

However, developers were a lot more sanguine about the executive condominium (EC) segment, which has seen a dearth of new launches, yet enjoys strong buyer demand.

The top bid for an EC site in Tampines Avenue 10 came in at \$434.45 million or \$578.12 psf ppr, within expectations and in line with winning bids in previous state tenders for EC sites.

All three sites have 99-year leases.

Worldwide Hotels, controlled by the Choo family, encompasses brands such as Hotel 81, V Hotel, Hotel Boss and Venue Hotel, and owns 38 hotels in Singapore and another eight in the Asia-Pacific. Its managing director, Ms Carolyn Choo, said the group envisages a four-star property that will be its landmark hotel for the Club Street site.

She declined to say how many hotel rooms are planned under the group's proposed scheme, but said there will be a commercial component comprising food and beverage and retail space. She estimates the total investment in the project, including construction, interest and fitting-out expenses, would be in the high \$700 million range.

"The premium paid for the Club Street site is likely due to the fact that it is one of the few remaining centrally located sites available for hotel development," said Mr Giuliano Esposito, JLL Hotels & Hospitality's senior vice-president of strategic advisory and asset management.

The top bid was 12.4 per cent higher than the second-highest offer, from a partnership between UOL Group and United Industrial Corporation. Shangri-La Group is understood to be behind the third-highest bid.

As for the Kampong Java site, it drew seven bids. The top bid from Chip Eng Seng unit CELH Develop-

ment was a tad above the second highest from GuocoLand. Chip Eng Seng Corporation group chief executive Raymond Chia said the group plans to develop a project with about 380 units, ranging from one to four-bedders.

The EC site in Tampines fetched seven bids. The highest, from a partnership between Hoi Hup Realty and Sunway Developments, was a tad higher than the second highest from MCC Land (Singapore) of \$431.62 million or \$574.36 psf ppr.

Ms Tricia Song, head of research for Singapore at Colliers International, noted that the top bid of \$578 psf ppr is the second highest on record for EC land, after Sunway Walk's \$583 psf ppr in March last year.

She said the outcome of this batch of tenders reflects the impact of last July's cooling measures, which saw developers shift their focus to the hotel and EC sectors amid a brighter outlook for tourism and the continued appeal of ECs.

"ECs have remained popular with developers post-measures, given the limited supply. The new minimum average unit size of 85 sq m should also have minimum impact for ECs as ECs are targeted at families in the first place, and the average unit size suggested by the development cap of 700 units is well above the 85 sq m," she added.

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SBS Transit still looking for new CEO

Christopher Tan
Senior Transport
Correspondent

Transport operator SBS Transit is expected to identify and groom a new chief executive officer, even after it recently appointed Mr Yang Ban Seng to the helm.

Mr Yang, 62, who is chief execu-

tive of SBS Transit's parent group ComfortDelGro Corp, was named CEO of the bus and rail subsidiary on Monday.

He replaces Mr Gan Juay Kiat, 61, who tendered his resignation last month over extra-marital affairs involving one or more subordinates.

According to well-placed sources, Mr Yang was asked to fill in for the time being as the group

searches for a suitable candidate to succeed Mr Gan.

Mr Yang is a group veteran, having led the taxi business of the Comfort Group since the 1990s - before Comfort's merger with DelGro in 2003. Post-merger, he continued heading the group's cab business.

He was appointed group CEO in 2017, when his predecessor Kua Hong Pak stepped down after a

long illness. Mr Kua died last November at age 74.

Mr Gan has been with SBS Transit for 11 years - first as chief operating officer, executive director, before being appointed CEO in 2010. He is on "garden leave" until March. The term refers to an employee who has relinquished his position but is told to stay away from work as he serves out his notice period.



Mr Yang Ban Seng (left) was named chief executive of SBS Transit on Monday, replacing Mr Gan Juay Kiat.

Said Mr David Leong, managing director of human resource firm PeopleWorldwide Consulting: "In finding a new leader, the organisation should be sourcing for someone who can take it through a five-to 10-year horizon. Hence, it is inevitable that they would be sourcing for a younger person."

"In the meantime, Ban Seng is a safe pair of hands to deal with the transition."

Said an SBS Transit shareholder: "Frankly, it is not easy to find someone who understands this industry. There are not many in the market."

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Glassdoor chief operating officer Christian Sutherland-Wong says that in a knowledge-driven labour economy like Singapore, job seekers need more knowledge on career choices. ST PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

cheque than at their previous jobs.

Typically, job seekers today rely on peer references to learn more about the job beyond what is described, such as the company's work environment, management styles and career prospects.

Yet, this word-of-mouth method might not be detailed or accurate, said Glassdoor corporate communications director Joe Wiggins.

As Glassdoor reviews are anonymous, "people aren't putting on a filter, and say what they really think", he added.

The website also adopts a "give-to-get model", in which users can try out the service for free, but will have to contribute their own reviews to fully access Glassdoor's data.

By giving users a non-economic incentive, a study found that the model reduced the polarisation bias that has plagued many review sites, where there are many extremely positive and negative reviews with few moderate ones.

The anonymised data has also been used by employers to find out what their staff think of them, as well as by researchers and policymakers to study trends in the labour market, since the data is available publicly.

But no matter how much Glassdoor encourages nuance in its reviews, some say it is still impossible to determine a company's work culture with a star rating or score.

Mr Sutherland-Wong acknowledges that there may be employers and staff who try to subvert the integrity of its ratings system, such as companies encouraging fake five-star reviews or former employees submitting poor reviews out of spite.

To guard against these "ballot box stuffing" tactics, Glassdoor has fraud detection algorithms as well as a content moderation team that investigates user-submitted reviews for such practices, he said.

Ultimately, more transparency on the job market will benefit job seekers and employers who want to build a conducive workplace, he added.

"Like in food reviews, the bar gets raised and even restaurants with great ratings know they can't get by serving ordinary food and providing ordinary service," said Mr Sutherland-Wong.

"The same is true with companies."

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Reviewing firms publicly is the way to go, says Glassdoor

Job search engine, launching here today, aims to offer insights via user-submitted company reviews

Ng Jun Sen
Business Correspondent

If customer reviews for restaurants can help Singaporeans pick where to eat, can reviews by a company's staff about its work culture help a job seeker choose the right career?

Glassdoor, a California-based job search engine that has made waves

for its feature of scoring employers out of five stars, believes that having a "review culture" for the job-seeking experience is the way to go, chief operating officer Christian Sutherland-Wong said yesterday.

The company is launching its Singapore website today and Mr Sutherland-Wong told The Straits Times that Glassdoor's expansion to Singapore came about because of the traction it gained among local users, even though it had not promoted or officially rolled out here.

Around 80,000 reviews have been submitted by employees here so far, rating around 11,000 companies listed on the website.

Glassdoor also saw 900,000 online visitors from Singapore each month.

It is clear that in a knowledge-driven labour economy like Singapore, job seekers need more knowledge on career choices, said Mr Sutherland-Wong, when he gave a demonstration of how the website works.

A survey commissioned by Glassdoor found 92 per cent of Singapore employees had ended up in jobs with different work cultures from what they were expecting, and 85 per cent of job seekers and employees said reading job reviews would help them decide where to work.

While basic job information such as starting salaries are available elsewhere, Glassdoor's hallmark is its global database of 45 million reviews on the more indefinite aspects of work, based on the experiences of current and former employees.

Companies are given an overall score on their company culture, pay practices, management styles, work-life balance and other factors that people look out for in a job hunt.

Glassdoor's research on Singapore job seekers found that 83 per cent of those surveyed placed workplace culture above earning a bigger pay

Report: S'pore could be among best places to hire tech talent

Seow Bei Yi
Business Correspondent

Singapore could become one of the world's top destinations for tech hiring in the coming decade, given its highly educated workforce, proximity to large Asian markets and pro-tech-investment policy stance.

A report on Singapore hiring trends released today by jobs website Glassdoor shows that hiring in the tech industry here outpaced that in the finance sector last year, based on job postings on the platform.

There were over 5,800 job postings in the tech sector here on Glassdoor as of last November, compared with about 4,710 in finance.

The company's chief economist Andrew Chamberlain noted that while hiring slowed in 2016 and 2017, the number of job vacancies on the site is increasing.

It saw 52,090 jobs posted in Singapore as of last November, up about 40 per cent from a year earlier.

In contrast, the 6.3 million jobs in the United States on the company's website in the same period were a 6 per cent rise year on year.

Ministry of Manpower figures also show that tech and finance hiring in Singapore is on the rise as a percentage of total vacant positions - from 6 per cent between 2006 and 2013, to over 12 per cent as of June last year, noted Glassdoor.

Said Dr Chamberlain: "The future of work in Singapore is likely to feature many more opportunities for 'knowledge workers' - those using data, software and intellectual skills - in the country's growing tech and financial sectors."

A factor behind the rise here is trade tensions between the US and China, as employers look increasingly to "move jobs into neutral territories outside of the US and China, to sidestep tariffs", he added.

"With abundant tech talent and proximity to growing Asian markets, Singapore is a natural choice - something we expect to continue

in 2019 and beyond."

Based on Glassdoor data, the biggest demand in the tech industry is for software engineers, while in the finance sector it is for risk managers.

Finance, however, still pays a premium. The estimated median base pay for jobs in finance is \$8,338 a month, about \$1,000 more than the median base pay for tech job openings.

But the pay becomes similar for the highest-paying roles.

In tech, a senior managing director at a computer hardware and software company earns an estimated median base pay of \$19,687 a month.

In finance, the top job opening is for an executive director of treasury services in an investment banking and asset management company. Its estimated median base pay is \$19,414 a month.

Separately, an online survey - commissioned by Glassdoor - of around 1,000 adults here suggests that 2019 could see a significant number of job moves.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents said they were either currently looking or planning to look for a new job. Many were young workers, with around 70 per cent of those aged 18 to 34 planning to find a new job, compared with about half of those aged 45 and older.

Most workers agreed to wishing they had a better understanding of

what fair pay is, possibly suggesting a lack of transparency on salary in the workplace, the results found.

Meanwhile, nine in 10 agreed the realities of a job, such as its hours, workload and responsibilities, tended to differ from expectations set by companies in interviews.

Four in five agreed that workplace culture is more important than earning more money, and almost three-quarters of employees and job seekers said they accepted the salary offered for their current or more recent job offer without negotiating.

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TOP EMPLOYERS HERE

The top indicator of workplace satisfaction is not pay, but factors such as a company's culture and values, its quality of senior leadership, and the career opportunities available.

When Glassdoor users complete a review of their employers, they are asked to rate the companies in areas such as work-life balance, compensation and benefits. The following rankings took into consideration reviews in Singapore:

HIGHEST-RATED EMPLOYERS

- Bloomberg
- SAP
- LinkedIn
- Mastercard
- Marina Bay Sands
- Cisco Systems
- Far East Organization
- Unilever

TOP 10 TECH EMPLOYERS

- ViSenze
- VMware
- LinkedIn
- Cisco Systems
- SAP
- Google
- AMD
- 2359 Media
- PayPal
- Salesforce

TOP 10 FINANCE EMPLOYERS

- Mastercard
- Goldman Sachs
- Morgan Stanley
- Julius Baer
- ANZ
- Barclays
- JP Morgan
- ABN AMRO
- Macquarie Group
- Credit Suisse

HIGHEST-RATED EMPLOYERS (COMPENSATION AND BENEFITS)

- Google
- PayPal

PSA posts 7% rise in TEUs handled last year

PSA International handled 81 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) of containers at its port projects around the world for the year ending Dec 31, 2018, up 7 per cent from a year ago.

The group's volume increased by 9.1 per cent from 2017, with flagship PSA Singapore contributing 36.31 million TEUs - up by 8.9 per cent - and PSA terminals outside Singapore handling 44.69 million TEUs, an increase of 9.3 per cent.

PSA group chief executive Tan Chong Meng said in a statement that 2018 was a "dual speed year" for the leading global port group.

"The slow but steady pace of global container trade growth continued, despite geo-political shifts and rising trade barriers," he added.

"At the same time, there was a surge in digitalisation activities within the global supply chain which promised better visibility and efficiency, while the industry continues to grapple with issues of data standardisation and collaboration."

Mr Tan said that against this backdrop, PSA Group has achieved good volume growth.

He thanked customers and partners for their support, as well as unions, staff and management for their dedication, including handling the "increased complexity and operational demands from the new state of shipping alliances with aplomb".

"As we run full speed into 2019, we at PSA are excited about the opportunities and challenges ahead in this age of disruptions," he said.

Mr Tan also said PSA will continue to build on its global network of ports while leading the charge towards co-creating an Internet of Logistics - a plug-and-play ecosystem that links up a mesh of communities through interoperability, and which allows it to innovate boldly.

The group plans to stretch its capabilities to realise its vision of a truly connected and transformed global supply chain, he added.

PSA participates in around 40 terminals in 16 countries across Asia, Europe and the Americas, with flagship operations in PSA Singapore Terminals and PSA Antwerp.

SLOW BUT STEADY GROWTH

The slow but steady pace of global container trade growth continued, despite geo-political shifts and rising trade barriers.



PSA GROUP CEO TAN CHONG MENG



Dr Koh Poh Koon, Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry, with Mr Veera Sekaran, one of the directors of VertiVegies, an indoor vertical farming firm, at the Indoor Ag-Con Asia conference at Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre yesterday. PHOTO: YEO KAI WEN FOR INDOOR AG-CON ASIA

S'pore eyes growth in urban farming, aquaculture tech

Enterprise Singapore, partners to co-invest over \$90m in agri-food tech start-ups

Sue-Ann Tan

Singapore has the "right ingredients" to make it the urban agriculture and aquaculture technology hub in the region, Dr Koh Poh Koon, Senior Minister of State for

Trade and Industry, said yesterday.

In a keynote speech at the Indoor Ag-Con Asia conference at Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre, he said Singapore is in a strong position to "catalyse technological and business innovations" as it has a climate for innovation,

strong talent base and strategic location, which can transform agriculture and aquaculture in the Asia-Pacific region.

"Where arable land is scarce, innovating how we produce food is critical in helping us overcome our farming constraints and better contribute to our food sustainability and traceability efforts," he added.

"Investments in agri-tech can also help to reduce our reliance on food imports and allow us to enjoy

seasonal produce while lowering our carbon footprint."

To boost the agri-tech sector, Dr Koh announced that Enterprise Singapore, through its investment arm Seeds Capital, has appointed seven investment partners under Startup SG Equity - a scheme that encourages private-sector investment for start-ups.

Seeds Capital aims to spur the growth of emerging and strategic sectors such as agri-tech, by stimu-

lating investment in innovative local start-ups.

Under this partnership, more than \$90 million worth of investments will go into early-stage tech start-ups with food and agri-tech solutions.

The appointed partners are AgFunder, Hatch, ID Capital, Openspace, The Yield Lab, Trendlines and VisVires New Protein.

With Seeds Capital, the partners will assist early-stage start-ups, such as by introducing new business partners and providing support to enter new markets.

Seeds Capital will also provide co-funding of up to \$4 million per deep tech start-up under Startup SG Equity.

Dr Koh said: "We are building a vibrant agri-tech start-up environment to uncover more talent, anchor experts, partners, investors and accelerators into our ecosystem, and expand the pool of knowledge and resources."

"We are developing relevant research capabilities in areas such as seed formulation and fish nutrition, advanced biotech-based protein production and food safety science. (Furthermore) we are establishing a high-tech physical cluster in Kranji to support operations in urban agriculture and aquaculture."

One of the Singapore agri-tech companies at the conference was Protenga, an insect farming company that produces animal feed. It has incorporated data sensors into its farms to help determine the right feeding frequency and amount, increasing the quality and volume of produce.

Another company, VertiVegies, an indoor vertical farming firm, also displayed its modular planting system that uses technology to ensure efficient plant growth, while taking up minimal space and giving Singapore the potential to achieve food security.

"Singapore's journey to become a leader in agriculture technology is still in the early days, and there is much more for us to do," added Dr Koh.

"I encourage industry representatives and leaders... to carry on your good work in leading the development of solutions and standards for the sector, to provide fertile ground for the germination of new ideas, technology matching and transfer, (and) capability development."

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Using tech in agriculture to overcome challenges

One start-up is planning to develop technology that can put a watermark on single seeds to prevent "counterfeits" that are packaged to look like they are from a certain brand when they are not.

Another company, Protenga, uses the Internet of Things to monitor and track insects that are used to produce animal feed.

These are among examples of Singapore firms using technology in the agricultural sector to enhance efficiency and overcome the challenges of operating in an urban environment.

They shared their agri-tech solutions at the Indoor Ag-Con Asia conference held at the Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre yesterday.

Ms Clara Chong, 23, chief commercial officer of Heseed, said: "The agriculture industry is quite traditional and has been so for a long time. There is huge room for growth in terms of bringing technology in. Our mission is to protect the

MAKING OF AN AGRI-TECH HUB

The challenge in Singapore has much to do with land, resources and water, but these factors that limit growth in agriculture can be solved by technology. As a city, we can find solutions that are efficient and bring them out into the world. We can be an agri-tech hub with the Singapore brand.



MR VEERA SEKARAN, one of the directors at vertical farming company VertiVegies.

seed business using innovative technology."

Heseed is working on ways to counter the sale of fake seeds by imprinting watermarks, which are currently printed only on packaging.

The company is also using technology to shorten the time seeds take to germinate.

Vertical farming company VertiVegies, meanwhile, has found ways to grow plants in urban environments. Working with Chinese farming company SananBio, it has multi-layered modules that use LEDs to grow plants indoors and utilise systems that regulate input factors such as temperature, humidity and nutrient mixes.

Since there is no soil involved and the plants are suspended in a nutrient-rich, water-based mix, there are no pests and diseases and no pesticide is needed. The final products are fresh, clean and chemical-free.

Mr Veera Sekaran, one of the firm's directors, said: "Our aim is to have food security. We can grow

these vegetables within a contained space and we have the technology to drive such production in controlled, urban environments.

"The challenge in Singapore has much to do with land, resources and water, but these factors that limit growth in agriculture can be solved by technology. As a city, we can find solutions that are efficient and bring them out into the world. We can be an agri-tech hub with the

Singapore brand."

He added that by harnessing technology, Singapore businesses can expand in an industry worth billions of dollars.

"We can be a big player and the research centre of the world," he said. "The red lion logo (sign of business excellence) can then become a green lion."

Sue-Ann Tan

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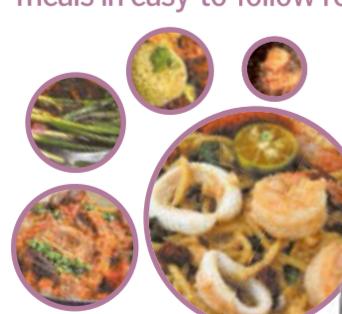
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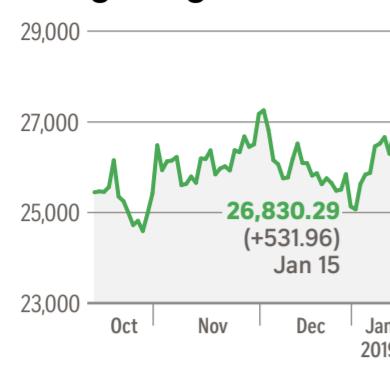
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S'pore market gains on hopes of China stimulus

Rise led by counters involved in \$11b deal between CapitaLand, Ascendas-Singbridge

Leila Lai

A day after unexpected misses in trade data scared investors into retreat, China's government swept cheer back into markets yesterday with indications it will inject stimulus into its economy to counter growth pressures.

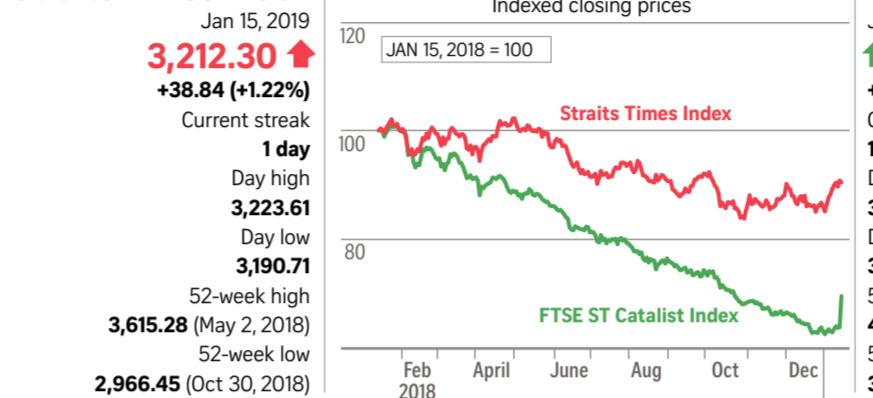
The National Development and Reform Commission said it aims to achieve "a good start" in the first quarter, and senior economic officials said China plans to cut taxes especially for small businesses and the manufacturing sector.

People's Bank of China deputy governor Zhu Hixin said China will avoid a "flood" of liquidity and instead maintain a stable macro-leverage ratio.

Singapore's Straits Times Index (STI) climbed steadily yesterday, moderating towards the closing bell to end 38.84 points, or 1.22 per cent, up at 3,212.30. Trading amounted to 1.6 billion securities worth \$1.17 billion. Advancers outnumbered decliners 252 to 157.

Nearly all 30 STI constituents closed higher, led by counters involved in the \$11 billion deal between CapitaLand and Ascendas-Singbridge.

Ascendas Real Estate Investment Trust climbed five cents, or 1.87 per cent, to \$2.73 after 28.9 million

Straits Times Index**Indexed closing prices**

units were traded, while CapitaLand, CapitaLand Commercial Trust and CapitaLand Mall Trust added between 0.3 per cent and 0.6 per cent each.

The only STI counters that did not end in the black were Comfort-

DelGro, which closed flat at \$2.14, and Jardine Matheson Holdings and Jardine Strategic Holdings, which both ended lower.

Financials were boosted by Citibank's fourth-quarter results reported in the United States on Mon-

DAILY**Indexed closing prices**

day. While the bank missed analysts' estimates for revenue, it beat profit expectations, soothing investors' concerns about earnings and a slowdown in the global economy, CNBC host Jim Cramer said.

The most actively traded counter was Ezion Holdings, which saw 82.7 million shares change hands. Shares of the liftboat owner and operator closed at 4.9 cents, up 0.1 cent or 2.08 per cent.

Another heavily traded stock was Genting Singapore, which picked up four cents, or 3.88 per cent, to \$1.07 on volume of 68.2 million.

Shares of Vallianz Holdings retreated 0.2 cent, or 20 per cent, to 0.8 cent, with 12.8 million shares traded. This followed the company's announcement late on Monday that a vessel managed by its subsidiary, Vallianz Offshore Marine, had been damaged by a collision with a tanker on Jan 13.

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Emerging market stocks trading near 6-week peak

BENGALURU/SHANGHAI • Emerging market stocks rose yesterday, helped by Chinese shares clocking their best day in a week and a half on signs of more stimulus, while developing world currencies broadly firmed against a soft dollar ahead of Britain's parliamentary vote on Brexit.

MSCI's developing world stocks benchmark rose 1.1 per cent and was near a six-week peak, pushed up by gains in index heavyweights China, South Korea and Taiwan, which all ended at least 1 per cent higher.

Turkey's lira softened 0.4 per cent. Unemployment in the country ticked up to 11.6 per cent in the September-November period, data yesterday showed.

South African stocks were on pace for their highest closing level in more than two months.

The rand weakened on technical factors as the dollar-rand pair started trade in close proximity to the 200-day moving average, after which bullish technical traders pushed the pair up as much as 0.4 per cent.

Russia's rouble was little changed with the central bank set to resume foreign exchange purchases after a five-month hiatus. Higher oil prices helped Russian stocks rise 0.6 per cent.

A rally in emerging market local currency government bonds saw the yield on JP Morgan's GBI-EM index hit its lowest level since May. The index saw its yield drop to 6.394 per cent, having stood at almost 6.7 per cent in mid-December.

REUTERS

Straits Times Index stocks

52-WEEK HIGH	LOW	COMPANY	CURRENCY LAST TRADED SALE	+OR-	'VOL '000	GROSS %	P/BV
286	245	Ascendas Reit	273	+5	28870	5.9	13
196	161	CapitaCom Trust	183	+1	16083	4.7	13
388	293	CapitaLand	328	+1	20366	3.7	11
238	195	CapitaLand Trust	233	+1	1648	4.1	11
1360	120	CityDev	882	+11	1222	2	0.8
251	196	ComfortDelGro	214	unch	7016	4.9	14
3128	2265	DBS Grp	2502	+45	4161	5.7	14
968	767	DairyFarm USD	US\$956	+28	947	2.2	17
141	855	Genting Sing	107	+4	68204	3.3	17
39	223	Golden Agri-Res.	159	+1	159	0.7	11
42	42	HDB Trust USD	US\$25.5	+0.5	58	10.3	11
744	588	HongkongLand USD	US\$693	+2	2654	2.9	0.3
6974	5580	JMH USD	US\$6760	-37	302	2.4	12
4149	3155	JSJ USD	US\$3660	-30	222	0.9	0.4
4015	2766	Jardine C&C	3659	+33	524	3.1	18
892	567	Kepel Corp	619	+5	1715	3.6	1
1404	1036	OCBC Bank	1168	+18	4568	3.2	17
585	455	SATS	91	+3	153	3.7	14
550	572	SCHL	233	+2	1024	4.1	8.3
1184	914	SIA	970	+4	1008	4.1	0.8
292	231	SPH	252	+5	4825	5.2	11
370	319	ST Engineering	361	+3	3780	4.2	5.3
360	243	Sembcorp Ind	265	+2	2502	1.9	12
365	283	Singtel	303	+18	18674	6.8	17
94	57	The Bev	714	+1	29115	0.9	35
3037	2380	UOB	2650	+50	2731	3.8	28
937	591	UOL	661	+8	1178	2.6	0.6
2965	1320	Venture Corp	1535	+55	1180	3.9	2
331	297	Wilmar Int'l	325	+3	2598	3.1	0.9
166	84	YTL Shipbdg SGD	130	+2	17316	3.5	0.9
166	84	YTL Shipbdg SGD	130	+2	17316	3.5	0.9

FTSE ST Large & Mid-Cap Index stocks

52-WEEK HIGH	LOW	COMPANY	CURRENCY LAST TRADED SALE	+OR-	'VOL '000	GROSS %	P/BV
286	245	Ascendas Reit	273	+5	28870	5.9	13
127	105	Ascott Reit	114	+1	5210	6.2	0.9
77	59	Bumitama Agrl	68	unch	100	1.1	16
185	143	CDL HTS Trust	154	unch	3602	1	1
196	161	CapitaCom Trust	183	+1	16083	4.7	11
388	298	Capitaland	328	+1	20366	3.7	0.7
238	195	CapitaMall Trust	195	+1	16033	4.8	11
169	133	CapitaChina Tr.	143	-1	1986	7.1	0.9
1360	700	CityDev	892	+11	1122	2	0.8
251	196	ComfortDelGro	214	unch	7016	4.9	18
3128	2265	DBS Grp	2502	+45	4161	5.7	14
968	767	DairyFarm USD	US\$956	+28	947	2.2	17
78	59	Far East H Trust	625	+0.5	2057	0.7	0.7
197	150	First Resources	170	unch	309	4	22
236	21	Frasers Cpt Tr	224	+1	1824	5.4	11
117	101	Frasers LCT Tr	106	-1	4273	6.5	11
141	855	Genting Sing	107	+4	68204	3.3	17
39	225	Golden Agri-Res.	27	+15	31229	3	0.7
234	167	Guocold Land Ltd	181	unch	207	3.9	0.5
42	23	HPH Trust USD	US\$25.5	+0.5	5318	10.3	0.4
6974	5580	JMH USD	US\$6760	-37	302	2.4	0.7
4							

German economy posts weakest growth in 5 years

BERLIN • The German economy grew by 1.5 per cent last year, the weakest rate in five years and markedly slower than the previous year, preliminary data showed yesterday, in a sign that exporters in Europe's largest economy are being hit by trade tensions.

German firms are struggling with a cooling of the global economy and tariff disputes triggered by US President Donald Trump. The risk that Britain will leave the European Union without a deal in March is another uncertainty.

The preliminary gross domestic product estimate published by the

Federal Statistics Office was in line with market expectations, and compared with a growth rate of 2.2 per cent in 2017.

"The German economy thus grew the ninth year in a row, although growth has lost momentum," the office said, adding that growth was mainly driven by domestic demand with household consumption and state spending up on the year.

Company investments in machinery and equipment were particularly strong, rising by 4.5 per cent on the year. This helped offset a slowdown in export growth, which nearly halved to 2.4 per cent, from 4.6 per cent in 2017.

As imports grew at a faster pace than exports, net trade had a slightly negative effect on overall growth, the office said.

The head of the DIW economic institute, Dr Marcel Fratzscher, pointed to strong domestic activity and the record state budget surplus of nearly €60 billion (\$S92.8 billion), which are both seen driving

growth this year as well.

"The strong labour market with rising employment and healthy wage hikes will help to maintain private consumption as the main pillar of economic growth," he said. "The trade disputes and the uncertainty surrounding a recession in the US in the coming two years are probably the biggest risks for the economy."

German exports to China grew nearly 10 per cent year on year from January to November, while exports to Britain fell by 3.6 per cent in the same period, the office said.

"The overall impact of Brexit on German economic growth is impossible to quantify," an official of the statistics office told a news conference in Berlin.

The office said the economy probably grew slightly in the fourth quarter of last year, which would mean it escaped recession - defined as two or more consecutive quarters of negative growth.

There was also a slightly positive statistical overhang at the end of

last year, suggesting the economy is carrying modest growth momentum into this year, the office said.

Policymakers and economists are racking their brains over how much the slowdown is caused by one-off factors, or if there are more fundamental, structural problems at play.

The statistics office pointed to domestic bottlenecks in new car registrations due to the introduction of stricter pollution standards, and a summer drought that caused disruptions to deliveries by river ferry of fuel and other raw materials.

But the economy's weak performance in the fourth quarter suggests that the contraction from July to September was more than just a blip and that Germany has reached peak growth.

Unexpectedly weak data from other European countries has pointed to a cooling in the euro zone economy as a whole, possibly making it harder for the European Central Bank to raise interest rates any time soon. REUTERS

CompanyBriefs

ST Engineering

ST Engineering announced yesterday that its aerospace arm secured new contracts worth \$450 million in the fourth quarter of last year for services, including maintenance and modification for a wide range of aircraft parts from the airframe to components.

This brings the total value of the contracts to \$2.06 billion for last year.

A number of new contracts secured in the quarter are for airframe heavy maintenance checks to service both commercial aircraft and private jets. These include a contract from a major North American airline to carry out heavy maintenance services for its A321s for the first time. The same airline also awarded a contract for an in-seat power supply, overhead bin and galley modification programme for its entire fleet of 48 A320s.

Multi-year contracts won in the fourth quarter of last year include a five-year component maintenance-by-the-hour contract extension to support an Asian airline's entire fleet of B737NG/MAX aircraft.

Sembcorp Marine

Sembcorp Marine's subsidiaries Sembcorp Marine Repairs and Upgrades, and Semb-Eco yesterday entered into a share swap agreement with Ecospec Global Technology and their shareholders Chee Hwee Hong and Neonlite Investments.

Some 10 million shares representing 20 per cent of the issued share capital of Ecospec Global Technology will be exchanged for 23.8 million shares representing 45 per cent of the issued share capital of Semb-Eco.

Ecospec Global Technology is a joint venture between Neonlite Investments (holding 75 per cent of its issued capital), Mr Chew (5 per cent) and Sembcorp Marine Repairs and Upgrades (20 per cent). Its principal activities are the research and experimental development of environmental and clean technologies.

Semb-Eco is a joint venture between Neonlite Investments (holding 30 per cent of Semb-Eco's issued share capital), Mr Chew (15 per cent) and Sembcorp Marine Repairs and Upgrades (55 per cent). The principal activity of Semb-Eco is investment holding.

Sembcorp Marine Repairs and Upgrades will also acquire five groups of Semb-Eco core patents, which are applied in the development of offshore and marine solutions.

Following the deal, Semb-Eco, Semb-Eco Technology and Semb-Eco R&D will become wholly owned Sembcorp Marine subsidiaries, while Ecospec Global Technology will cease to be an associated company of the group.

Grand Venture registers IPO, seeks expansion in medical sector

It plans to raise about \$13.2m; eyes areas like medical imaging and surgical robots

Seow Bei Yi
Business Correspondent

Local manufacturer Grand Venture Technology has registered its offer document for an initial public offering (IPO) on the Catalyst board, and is eyeing expansion into the medical sector with proceeds from the offering.

Grand Venture, established in Singapore in 2012, provides engineering, assembly and testing services used in semiconductor manufacturing and the analytical life sciences industry. It has facilities in Singapore, Malaysia and China.

The company announced yesterday that it is looking to raise about \$13.2 million in gross proceeds, in part by issuing new shares, making it the first IPO of this year. These comprise a public tranche of 800,000 shares and a placement tranche of 42,118,000 shares at 27.5 cents each.

Separately, investment holding company Sunshine Power has entered into an agreement with Grand Venture to subscribe for 5,095,000 shares at the same price.

Based on this price, the company's market capitalisation is expected to be about \$64.4 million, it said yesterday.

It plans to start trading on Jan 23.

The money raised will go towards investing and enhancing operational and engineering capabilities, as well as expansion via mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures and partnerships. It will also help repay bank borrowings and serve as general working capital.

Chief executive Julian Ng, 46, said: "We believe the medical industry will bring us more stable business. It's not so cyclical... The barrier to entry is also high and once you enter, you are in it for the long term."



Grand Venture Technology chief executive Julian Ng (far left) and executive chairman Ricky Lee. Mr Ng says some of the IPO proceeds will go towards transforming the company with automation
ST PHOTO: YEN MENG JIIN

Venture mostly derives its revenue from multinational customers operating in Singapore and Malaysia.

The company's revenue has grown at a compounded annual growth rate of 87 per cent from \$8.8 million in financial year 2015 to \$30.9 million in financial year 2017. Revenue grew from \$15.8 million in the first half of 2017 to \$21.8 million in the same period last year.

Its net profit was \$3.8 million in the financial year 2017, compared with a net loss of \$2.4 million in the financial year 2015.

GOOD PROSPECTS

We believe the medical industry will bring us more stable business. It's not so cyclical... The barrier to entry is also high and once you enter, you are in it for the long term.

GRAND VENTURE CEO JULIAN NG

Mr Ng said the company is looking into areas in the medical industry such as medical imaging and diagnostics, as well as microscopes and surgical robots.

With companies in some of its existing industries - such as analytical life sciences - also moving to sell instruments to hospitals, Grand Venture's move will position it for deeper partnerships in their supply chains, he added.

Mr Ng said some of the proceeds will go towards transforming the company with automation, adding that it is also considering partnerships overseas to bring more capabilities to Singapore.

The company said its prospects are "buoyed by sustained demand for semiconductor capital equipment", supporting global demand for consumer electronics and wireless communication, among others.

In the analytical life sciences equipment segment, growth is expected to be driven by the prevalent use of mass spectrometry technologies in drug development and increased research and development spending by pharmaceutical companies, it said.

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Interbank currency rates

Currencies	Against \$ Bid	Offer	Against \$ Bid	Offer
\$/US\$ to one unit of foreign currency:				
Australian dollar	0.9755	0.9760	0.7218	0.7219
Canadian dollar	1.0194	1.0201	0.7545	0.7543
Euro	1.5503	1.5510	1.1471	1.1472
NZ dollar	0.9244	0.9253	0.6840	0.6844
Sterling pound	1.7411	1.7423	1.2883	1.2887
US dollar	1.3515	1.3520	-	-
\$/US\$ to 100 units of foreign currency:				
Chinese renminbi	20.0115	20.0237	14.8069	14.8104
Danish kroner	20.7712	20.7821	15.3690	15.3714
Hong Kong dollar	1.723	1.724	1.27507	1.27520
Indian Rupee	190	190	1.4068	1.4073
Indonesian rupiah	0.0096	0.0096	0.0071	0.0071
Japanese yen	1.2432	1.2440	0.9199	0.9201
Korean won	0.1206	0.1207	0.0892	0.0892
Malaysian ringgit	3.296	3.300	2.43843	2.44081
New Taiwan dollar	4.3836	4.3895	3.2466	3.2466
Norwegian kroner	15.8290	15.8405	11.7122	11.7163
Philippine peso	25.965	25.990	1.9212	1.9223
Saudi riyal	36.0275	36.0447	26.6574	26.6603
Swedish krona	15.1080	15.1186	11.787	11.824
Swiss franc	137.6553	137.7764	101.8537	101.9056
Thai Baht	4.2367	4.2396	3.1348	3.1358

MSCI INDICES				
Jan 14	In local curr	%dy	%yr	Index Change
World Preliminary	1485.1	-0.5	3.0	
EAFFE Preliminary	1033.8	-0.5	2.6	
Europe Preliminary	1440.2	-0.7	2.5	
Australia	1163.2	0.0	1.9	
Austria Preliminary	521.6	-0.8	4.7	
Belgium Preliminary	967.2	-0.5	4.7	
Canada Preliminary	1908.4	0.0	4.2	
Denmark Preliminary	7575.0	-2.1	2.3	
Finland Preliminary	683.7	-0.5	4.7	
France Preliminary	1728.0	-0.5	0.8	
Germany Preliminary	871.0	-0.3	3.2	
Greece Preliminary	46.4	-0.2	7.1	
India	1247.4	-0.4	-1.2	
Indonesia	7269.5	-0.5	2.8	
Ireland Preliminary	186.3	-0.2	3.9	
Israel Preliminary	239.9	-17	4.0	
Italy Preliminary	651.5	-0.6	4.7	
Japan	917.7	0.0	2.7	
Korea	610.5	-0.9	1.1	
Malaysia	579.8	-0.4	-0.3	
Netherlands Preliminary	1475.3	-10	1.2	
New Zealand	136.4	0.3	2.8	
Norway Preliminary	2894.3	-0.5	3.9	
Pakistan	384.6	0.4	7.8	
Philippines	1364.5	17	8.1	
Portugal Preliminary	83.4	-0.2	3.3	
Singapore	1652.8	-0.9	3.7	
Singapore Free	355.4	-0.9	3.7	

Source: MSCI

Government securities

GOVERNMENT BONDS	Issue code	Coupon rate (%)	Maturity	Closes Bid	High	Day's Low	Jan 15
2-Year	NY05100N	3.250%	01-Sep-20	102.16	102.17	102.17	
5-Year	NX13100H	2.750%	01-Jul-23	103.31	103.35	103.35	



R. Subramanian

Age: 67

Passed away peacefully on 15 January 2019.
Dearly missed and fondly remembered by loved ones.

*To our dearest father, a self made man,
you will be greatly missed by us.
We will always cherish the moments that
we were fortunate enough to share with you.
Your achievements will always inspire us.*

Wife: G. Paramaeswary

Father:
D. Ramasamy (deceased)

Mothers:
R. Radha Bai
R. Devaki

Sons:
S. Shree Raaman
S. Komaresan

Daughter:
S. Abirame

Sister:
R. Amirtham

Brother-in-law:
P. Kalimuthu

Nephews:
K. Kurumbian (Ganesh)
K. Kuhan
K. Kumaaran

Niece:
Komi Rajdev
Caregiver:
Jepiratha Vinayagamoorthy

And all relatives and friends.

Wake is held at 37 Simon Place, Singapore 545982.
Cortege leaves on Wednesday 16 January 2019 at 3.15pm
for Mandai Crematorium Hall 1 for cremation at 4.15pm.

With Deepest Sympathy and Heartfelt Condolences to

Chia Lee Meng Raymond PBM
Group Chief Executive Officer of
Chip Eng Seng Group
on the demise of
his beloved father



Chia Teck Liang

Departed on 14 January 2019

From :

Alan Wang
Goh Tiong Yong George



With Deepest Sympathy and Heartfelt Condolences to The Family of our Late Founder



Mr R. Subramanian

Departed on 15 January 2019

From Management and Staff of
Subraco LLP and its affiliated entities:
Nian Management Services Pte Ltd
Accounting Advantage Pte Ltd

Mr R. Subramanian was the founder of the
Public Accounting firm, R. Subramanian & Co in 1984,
converted into an Accounting Limited Liability Partnership,
Subraco LLP in 2010.

*As a mark of respect, the companies will be closed
on Wednesday 16 January 2019
from 1.00pm onwards.*

With Deepest Sympathy & Heartfelt Condolences to The family of the late



MR CHIA TECK LIANG
Departed on 14 January 2019

From
The Management & Staff of



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- Details to be included in the announcement,
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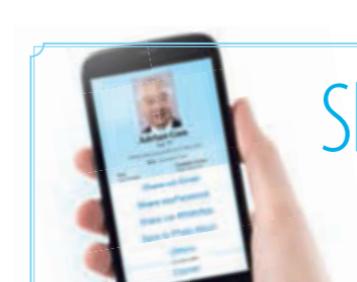
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2

WINNERS ABOVE 30 IN LAST 8 MAJORS,
WITH ONE, SERGIO GARCIA, IN S'PORE C8

SPORT

SAWHNEY TO HEAD ICC

Singaporean will take up CEO post at cricket governing body after this year's World Cup

Wang Meng Meng

GOOD POTENTIAL

It is a rare sport where all its formats... are all relevant and popular. And there is space to grow new markets, like women's cricket and Under-19s cricket, for example.



MANU SAWHNEY, incoming ICC chief, on the room for growth in cricket.

Manu Sawhney, the former chief executive of the Singapore Sports Hub, was yesterday named the International Cricket Council's (ICC) new CEO.

The Singaporean will be based in the sport's governing body's headquarters in Dubai from next month and will officially take over from David Richardson after the Cricket World Cup in England and Wales from May to July.

Speaking to The Straits Times last night, he said: "This is a dream job in the sport of cricket and I am very humbled and privileged to be able to serve the global community. I am very proud that a Singaporean is able to contribute to the sport."

ICC chairman Shashank Manohar added in a press statement yester-

day evening: "Manu brings 22 years of outstanding commercial experience to the ICC and will lead the delivery of our new global growth strategy for the game."

"Our search produced a host of excellent candidates from around the world but Manu stood out as the man to work with our members and take cricket forward."

"He has proven success in a number of leadership roles in both sport and broadcasting."

"He is a strategic thinker and understands the cricket landscape and its complexities."

Sawhney, 52, will spend the coming months establishing his strategy to popularise the sport even further.

He explained: "Cricket has more than a billion followers and it is a rare sport where all its formats - Twenty20, one-day Internationals and Test matches - are all relevant and popular."

"And there is space to grow new markets, like women's cricket and Under-19s cricket, for example."



Manu Sawhney, the former Sports Hub CEO who oversaw the first National Day Parade held at the National Stadium, intends to further cricket's popularity both internationally and in Singapore. ST FILE PHOTO

"I'll be actively listening to stakeholders to understand the opportunities they see to get a better understanding of various perspectives."

"I'm also looking forward to bringing international cricket to Singapore."

The veteran media professional had a 17-year career at ESPN Star Sports where he rose up the ranks to become its managing director. There, he sealed a broadcasting deal with the ICC for its global events from 2007-2015. He is also a board member of English Premier

League football club Manchester United.

He joined the Sports Hub as its CEO in 2015 and resigned in 2017.

Before his resignation, the Sports Hub conducted an investigation into an anonymous complaint made against him, but no action was warranted.

Looking back at his stint with the Sports Hub, Sawhney, who was working on projects for private equity firms in the past one and a half years, said: "The anonymous allegations were unsubstantiated and the investigations had closed. I had already moved on."

"There were a number of firsts and wins. The lay-and-play turf solved the pitch problems, we held the first Singapore Rugby Sevens, the first NDP (National Day Parade) at the new stadium, the Coldplay concert and the Community Play Day were massive successes."

"I am very proud of the positive work the team and I had done at the Sports Hub."

meng@sph.com.sg

Manchester City's Gabriel Jesus stretches to tap in his first goal during their 3-0 win over Wolves. The Brazilian later added a second to take his prolific run this year to seven from three games as the champions cut Liverpool's lead atop the Premier League to four points. PHOTO: REUTERS



City will pounce if Liverpool slip up: Guardiola

LONDON • Pep Guardiola said that he has no "magician's ball" to tell him how many points his Manchester City side may need to retain their Premier League title, following Monday's 3-0 win over Wolves that cut leaders Liverpool's lead to four points.

The Spaniard, however, also warned that his men are ready to pounce if the Reds, on 57 points after 22 games, falter. City took last season's title with a record 100 points.

After two goals from Gabriel Jesus and a Conor Coady own goal at the Etihad, Guardiola was quizzed

on the number of points needed to become champions this year.

"I don't have a magician's ball to discover how many. I said to them (the players) don't look at the schedule, don't look at the calendar for the Liverpool games," he said.

"Forget about it, normally when this happens in my experience you then lose your own games. And then it's over. All we can do is win our games and be there and maybe one day they fail; but if we don't win, they will be champions."

"The best way is to look at the next game - Huddersfield. If Liverpool win the title, then I am sure I

will congratulate Jurgen Klopp because it will be well deserved."

Two first-half goals from Jesus showed City had banished their shaky December form, when they lost three league games to Chelsea, Crystal Palace and Leicester.

Monday's victory was their third straight in the league and fifth in a row in all competitions since the loss to the Foxes on Boxing Day.

Two weeks into 2019, they have scored a remarkable 21 goals in four home games and 99 in all competitions already this campaign.

Jesus had scored just three times in his 16 league games coming into

the new year but his two-goal showing continued his rich vein of form. He scored once in the seven-goal FA Cup third-round win over Rotherham and hit four in last week's 9-0 League Cup semi-final first-leg humiliation of Burton, and now has seven goals in his past three outings.

City's task was made easier when Willy Boly made a rash challenge after 19 minutes. The French defender's out-of-control, one-footed lunge at Bernardo Silva may not have been malicious but was deserving of a straight red.

"Playing with 10 is tough, but playing with 10 is even harder. It was a tough night. Since we conceded the first goal, it became very difficult."

"There's no doubt about the result, they controlled the game and had the chances."

"It's very close to me and I think it's a clear red card," the Wolves manager said.

"Goals Gabriel Jesus has scored in his last eight appearances for Manchester City in all competitions at the Etihad Stadium.

12

LOH'S FEET FIRMLY ON THE GROUND

Denmark stint leaves shuttler aware of improvement needed despite Thailand Masters win

David Lee

Loh Kean Yew had just beaten arguably the best shuttler of all time on Sunday as he chases his dream of an Olympic gold, but the Singaporean is not getting carried away.

Just over 24 hours after his sensational Thailand Masters final win over Lin Dan, who won two Olympic golds and five world titles, Loh told The Straits Times in a phone interview from Denmark yesterday: "All along I have believed I could get to the top, and beating Lin Dan is nice, but I also know that this is just one win and there is still a long way for me to go."

His encounter with another former world No. 1, Viktor Axelsen, has also helped keep his feet firmly on the ground.

Since last October, he has been

training in Denmark, while playing for Langhoj Badminton Club in the second tier of the Danish league.

During this time, former Denmark international Joachim Persson, who was also with the club, arranged a four-day training camp in which the 21-year-old got to train with 2017 world champion Axelsen and other top players such as ex-world No. 2 Jan Jorgensen.

They would practise drills such as two-versus-one exercises, in which two players would attack and one would defend. Other times, it would be one-on-ones.

"Training with them showed me I was still far from reaching their world-class standard. I was thinking, 'If it were a match and Viktor goes 100 per cent against me, I will die,'" said Loh, who leapt from 125th to a career-high 77th in the latest world rankings.

The sessions made me see how intense and focused they are in training. They know exactly what they want and need to work on.

"For me to get there, everything about my game needs to improve, especially my fitness, and my

touches also need refining."

He even got a lift home from Axelsen and asked about the pressure of being a world champion and handling expectations.

"His advice was to continue to train hard and not care about what others say because they are not in our shoes and they will not understand. And don't let any victory get too big for you, always stay grounded," said Loh.

Together with six other Danish and international shuttlers, Loh also had centralised training for five weeks in the small town of Billund, 265km west of Copenhagen.

They stayed together at the club owner's house, just next to the training centre, and the environment was totally different from what Loh was used to in Singapore.

Instead of a training schedule, the players had to plan and arrange their own programme, decide for themselves what they want to work on, and check with the coach and players if they were available.

"This makes us take ownership of our own programme and progress. We learn to be disciplined and in-

dependent, but also how to work as a team as we help each other look out for what each of us needs to work on," he said.

Playing in the Danish league also exposed Loh to different playing styles on a more frequent basis.

He explained: "Broadly speaking, the Asian players are more skilful. The Europeans are physically stronger and they don't make many simple errors, which means I need to be more patient."

"Overall, training and playing in this type of intense and competitive environment where there are not many distractions was definitely a very good experience and a boost to my development."

After completing his contract with Langhoj, Loh will go for the Swedish Open this week before trying to qualify for next week's Indonesia Masters, where he could face Lin, Axelsen, and Jorgensen again.

He will then return for the Jan 26-Feb 1 Singapore National Open Championships.

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GULF TO BRIDGE

Training with them showed me I was still far from reaching their world-class standard. I was thinking, 'If it were a match and Viktor goes 100 per cent against me, I will die'.

LOH KEAN YEW

national shuttler, on sparring with top Danish players, including world No. 6 Viktor Axelsen.

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

Asian players are more skilful. The Europeans are physically stronger and they don't make many simple errors, which means I need to be more patient.

LOH

identifying certain playing styles among Asian and European players from his experience in Denmark.



Fresh from winning the Thailand Masters on Sunday with a straight-sets victory over China's former world and Olympic champion Lin Dan, Singapore's Loh Kean Yew will contest the Jan 17-20 Swedish Open. PHOTO: SINGAPORE BADMINTON OPEN

Giant-killer urges juniors to 'dream bigger'

In the aftermath of his Thailand Masters win over Lin Dan last Sunday, Singapore shuttler Loh Kean Yew penned a 292-word WhatsApp message, not to his family, friends or fans, but to his juniors in the national intermediate squad (NIS).

The 21-year-old thanked them for their support and encouraged them to "dream bigger".

He wrote: "Set a goal big enough for people to laugh at. They laugh because it is impossible for them. They are the weaklings, not you. Work hard towards it."

Loh, the youngest of four brothers, has come a long way from the 12-year-old boy who was unwilling to leave Penang and enrol in the Singapore Sports School (SSP) on a formal sports scholarship.

In a phone interview from Denmark, he told The Straits Times yesterday: "It definitely wasn't easy to leave my family and friends and go to a new place all by myself. In my

mind, I didn't want to go.

"But knowing my older brother (national shuttler Kean Hean) had been in Singapore for a year already made me feel more at ease as I knew he would take care of me as best as he could.

"And I have had no regrets. After spending so many years training and developing in Singapore, I made many new friends and was ready to be a Singapore citizen, serve national service (he completed full-time NS in October) and represent this country."

"I am honoured to wear the Singapore flag on my chest, and I was taught by my Sports School coaches to give back or pay it forward, which was also why I sent the text to the NIS group."

Described by the 23-year-old Kean Hean as positive, cheeky at times, disciplined and hungry for success, Loh, like his brothers, was exposed to various sports from

young by their father, who was a table tennis player in his school days.

"Using the gate as the net, we started playing badminton just outside our house with our brothers during our free time, and my father would join us occasionally after work," said Kean Hean, who won a men's doubles silver with Danny Bawa Chrisnanta at the Estonian International on the same day of his brother's sensational victory.

"It was a family bonding session, but even then, he was the best among us."

Loh added: "Before becoming a national player, I played many sports – basketball, soccer, table tennis, tennis and volleyball. Not as good as badminton, but see form lah, can contribute and score lah."

But the racket and shuttlecock remained his true love, which was enhanced after watching Lin beat Lee Chong Wei in the men's singles final at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Loh made his own mark at a major meet on home ground when he stunned Vietnam's former world No. 4 and 2013 World Championships bronze medallist Nguyen Tien Minh in the opening round of the 2015 SEA Games, before picking up a joint bronze.

In 2016, he beat China's then-world No. 11 Wang Zhengming at the Asia Team Championships before he enlisted later that year.

Even then, Kean Hean revealed how Loh would rush to extra night sessions after booking out from the army camp to train when he could.

Loh added: "When I was younger, I loved badminton simply because it was fun. Now, I enjoy it because it is ever-changing. There is so much strategy to it."

"I find it interesting to anticipate what opponents will do and try to outsmart them."

Regardless of what the future brings for this athlete, who aims to

win Olympic gold, Loh's spirited triumph over Lin has already inspired players such as Megan Lee and Nigel Yap of the NIS.

Megan, 13, said: "As a young player, he wasn't afraid to dream big and he committed to it, chasing after his goals."

"Even after his success, he remains humble and grateful for the support he is receiving in his journey to being a world-class athlete."

Nigel, 16, added: "Watching the final live, I found out what is required to become a world-class player. Not only is Kean Yew a player with great physical fitness and skills, he is also mentally strong, beating numerous higher-ranked players."

"I realised his road to the top is not an easy one. Only through consistent hard work and determination was he able to get to the level he is now."

David Lee



In victory, a humble Loh Kean Yew does not forget those who helped him along the way, thanking the younger ones and spurring them on. PHOTO: FACEBOOK/LEEYISHYAN

Asian Cup 2019

Change in Thai coach a game changer

AL-AIN (United Arab Emirates) • Thailand looked in disarray when they sacked their coach one game into the Asian Cup but are now dreaming of greater things, inspired by their very own Messi.

Milovan Rajevac's dismissal following the shock 4-1 Group A opening loss to India appeared to have galvanised the War Elephants.

The bleach-blond midfielder Chanathip Songkrasin, 25, was key to their revival. He scored a sublime winner against Bahrain and set up

the equaliser in Monday's 1-1 draw with hosts United Arab Emirates as the five-time Asean champions reached the knockout stages for the first time since 1972, when they finished third as hosts.

Interim coach Sirisak Yodiyadthai said a change of mindset was key as they edged ahead of Bahrain on their head-to-head result after finishing level on four points, one behind the UAE.

He said: "When I came in I felt that things needed to change.

"I inserted determination and motivation for the players and, during the last two games, I know they were determined to play well and make a positive result."

They were not cowed by the bigger and stronger UAE team, conceded just seven minutes in but hit back through Thitiphan Puangchan four minutes before the break.

"We have been through a lot of things but it's the team spirit that united us," the 1.58m Chanathip told Thai newspaper The Nation af-

ter the Bahrain game.

India failed to go through and then saw their coach, Stephen Constantine, resign after a 1-0 loss to the Bahrainis to finish bottom.

In Group A, champions Australia confirmed their passage into the last 16 behind Jordan with a 3-2 stoppage-time win over Syria after taking the lead twice yesterday. Jordan, who beat the Socceroos in the opener, drew 0-0 with Palestine but still topped the group with seven points.

ASIAN CUP

Kyrgyzstan v Philippines
Singtel TV Ch115 & StarHub Ch209, 9.20pm

South Korea v China
Ch116 & Ch210, 9.20pm

Vietnam v Yemen
Ch115 & Ch209, 11.50pm

Iran v Iraq
Ch116 & Ch210, 11.50pm

Paul Casey stretching on the driving range at Serapong Course yesterday. He had a fine, and fun, 2018 in winning the Valspar Championship in March and playing a role in Europe's Ryder Cup win in September. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM



SMBC Singapore Open 2019

OLD CAN STILL BE GOLD ON COURSE

Holder Garcia and Casey insist they are still hungry and recent fine outings attest to that

TRAIN WISELY

You realise that you have to take care of your body a bit more and that quality is always better than quantity. Maybe you don't practise as long, which forces you to be more focused.

SERGIO GARCIA, on how he balances time and focus.

Lester Wong

Compared to their younger counterparts, Spaniard Sergio Garcia and Englishman Paul Casey may not drive as far or practise as much.

But make no mistake about these "oldies". They are still hungry to win on the greens.

"It's great to see the youngsters coming out and doing well, but I'm still hungry, still put in the practice, still try hard out there," said SMBC Singapore Open defending champion Garcia, who has returned to the Sentosa Golf Club's Serapong Course to defend his title from tomorrow to Sunday.

"Just because there are other things in my life now like family that are more important than golf does not mean I don't want to win every time I play."

A quick look at the statistics would suggest that professional golf is now a young man's game.

Among the world's top 10, only No. 1 Justin Rose (38), No. 3 Dustin Johnson (34) and No. 9 Francesco Molinari (36) are on the wrong side of 30, while Molinari and Garcia are the only two Major winners in the last two years who are above 30.

No. 24 Casey, the highest-ranked player in the US\$1 million (\$1.35 million) Singapore Open, witnessed first-hand the power of youth last week at the Sony Open in Hawaii, where 23-year-old American Cameron Champ outdrove him for two days before the 41-year-old missed the cut.

Casey said: "I've always been OK in terms of distance but he was hitting drives 30-40 yards by mine."

"Seeing guys crack it 15 yards by me used to be such an anomaly so to be 40 yards behind. It's just really difficult to compete against that, especially on big, open courses."

He is averaging 280 yards on the PGA Tour this season. Champ is averaging 320, and still has six others hitting it further than him.

But there is no doubt that the older players can still cut it at the top. A 40-year-old - Matt Kuchar - won the Sony Open last Sunday by

four strokes, while 54-year-old Davis Love III finished a creditable seventh.

Garcia, a former teen sensation who made the cut for a European Tour event aged 15 years and 46 days, won his first Major at the 2017 Masters as a 37-year-old, while Casey took his first PGA Tour title in nine years - and second overall - last March at the Valspar Championship, holding off Patrick Reed and a certain Tiger Woods for a one-stroke victory.

Both went on to star for the victorious Team Europe at the Ryder Cup last September, when Garcia won three of his four matches to become the competition's all-time leading points scorer with 25.5 points.

Casey said: "I had so much fun last year and that's lit a fire again. I think I'm even more hungry in a way now, just knowing that the clock is ticking and that I've got maybe five to six years of world-class golf left."

The key, according to Garcia, is the rebalancing of time and focus.

"You realise that you have to take care of your body a bit more and that quality is always better than quantity," said Garcia, father to a 10-month-old daughter with wife Angela Akins.

"Maybe you don't practise as long, which forces you to be more focused."

Casey revealed that Love, who will also feature at the Singapore Open this week, is a guiding light for older pros.

Casey said: "I take inspiration from what Love has done. My opportunities to win are fewer than it used to be but, when I'm putting well, I can beat anyone on any day."

lesterw@sph.com.sg

Next 48 Hours

TODAY

BASKETBALL

ABL Mono Vampire v Malaysia Dragons (StarHub Ch202, 7.30pm).

FOOTBALL

AFC Asian Cup Group C: Kyrgyzstan v Philippines (Singtel TV Ch115 & StarHub Ch209), South Korea v China (Ch116 & Ch210) - 9.20pm. Gp D: Vietnam v Yemen (Ch115 & Ch209), Iran v Iraq (Ch116 & Ch210) - 11.50pm. English FA Cup 3rd-round replay: Southampton v Derby (Singtel TV Ch111, tomorrow, 3.40am).

TENNIS

Australian Open Day 3 (Singtel TV Ch114/Ch115 & StarHub Ch208/209, 8am & 4pm).

TOMORROW

FOOTBALL

AFC Asian Cup Group G: Japan v Uzbekistan (Singtel TV Ch115 & StarHub Ch209), Oman v Turkmenistan (Ch116 & Ch210) - 9.20pm. Gp E: Saudi Arabia v Qatar (Ch114 & Ch208), Lebanon v North Korea (Ch115 & Ch209) - 11.50pm.

GOLF

European Tour Abu Dhabi C'ship: Day 1 (StarHub Ch204, 3pm). Asian Tour SMBC Singapore Open, Day 1: sessions 1 (9am) & 2 (3pm) - StarHub Ch201. Serapong Course, Sentosa Golf Club. LPGA Tour Tournament of Champions: Day 1 (Singtel TV Ch116 & StarHub Ch210, Friday, 1am).

TENNIS

Australian Open Day 4 (Singtel TV Ch114/Ch115 & StarHub Ch208/209, 8am & 4pm).

For latest updates, go to singteltv.com.sg & starhubgo.com or check the on-screen TV guide.



Harden's 57pt show softens Houston's injury problem

HOUSTON (Texas) • No Chris Paul. No Eric Gordon. No Clint Capela. No problem. As long as the Houston Rockets have James Harden.

In a mind-boggling performance, Harden and his supporting cast managed to rout the Memphis Grizzlies 112-94 in their National Basketball Association (NBA) home game on Monday night, with Harden scoring 57 points in 34 minutes.

It was the 17th game in a row in which Harden scored at least 30 points, a feat bettered by only Elgin Baylor (18 games, 1961-62) and Wilt Chamberlain (four streaks of at least 20 games, including 65 straight games from November 1961 to February 1962).

It was his third game of 50 or more points this season. No other player has more than one.

"No pressure," the NBA's reigning Most Valuable Player said. "I do this for a living. I have fun with it. The win was important. I've got to get some rest and be ready to go Wednesday. Same thing."

While the scoring burst was

hardly unexpected for Harden, averaging an NBA-leading 34.8 points a game, the Rockets' personnel situation made it stand out.

Paul has been out with a hamstring problem since Dec 20 and Gordon has been out with an injured knee since Dec 29.

Houston's injury report then took on what seemed like a crippling blow earlier on Monday when it was revealed that centre Capela, the most frequent recipient of Harden's assists, would be out for four to six weeks with ligament damage in his right thumb.

That list of injuries left Harden starting alongside the less productive quartet of P.J. Tucker (five points), Nene (two), Austin Rivers (11) and Danuel House Jr (15).

No matter, as Harden joined Charlotte's Kemba Walker as the only players to score more than half their team's points in a game this season.

He was hot from the start, setting a Rockets record with 36 points in the first half, and he succeeded all

game with his typical combination of three-pointers (six for 15) and free throws (17 for 18).

He also led all players in the game with nine rebounds and committed just five turnovers despite his outrageous level of ball usage.

The last time he scored fewer than 30 points was in the Dec 11 win over the Portland Trail Blazers, when he had 29.

Since then he has averaged 43.9 points over the 17 games in which the Rockets (25-18), who had a poor start this season, have gone 13-4.

In the 17 games, Harden has topped 50 points twice and 40 points 10 times. He has also recorded five triple-doubles.

"It's beyond impressive," said Rockets coach Mike D'Antoni, who himself notched his 600th career win. "It's rare that people can do what he's doing."

Garrett Temple and Mike Conley scored 14 each for the Grizzlies (19-24), who have dropped eight of their past nine games. NYTIMES, REUTERS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Houston Rockets guard James Harden making light of the defensive efforts of Memphis Grizzlies' Mike Conley (No. 11) and guard Garrett Temple as he drives to the basket during the Rockets' 112-94 win. Harden scored 57 points, the third game in which he has scored 50 or more this season. PHOTO: REUTERS

SPORTS FIXTURES HIGHLIGHTS				
Event	Home	Away	Timing	Venue
Wed, 16 Jan 2019				
A League	Central Coast	Melbourne City	4.50pm	LW
Asian Cup	Korea Republic	China PR	9.30pm	LW*
Asian Cup	Kyrgyzstan	Philippines	9.30pm	LW*
Thu, 17 Jan 2019				
Asian Cup	Vietnam	Yemen	12.00am	LW*
Asian Cup	Iran	Iraq	12.00am	LW*
Italian Cup	Juventus +	Milan	1.30am	LW*
French League	Monaco	Nice	2.00am	LW*
English Cup	Southampton	Derby	3.45am	LW*
French League	St Etienne	Marseille	4.00am	LW*

* This match is played on neutral ground.
LW: Telecast not available at Livewire/Singapore Pools)
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SPORT

Australian Open 2019

WILLIAMS IN WINNING GARB

2017 champ, at scene of her last Slam title, progresses with convincing victory

MELBOURNE • Serena Williams dressed for work yesterday as she were intent on reminding people who she was before she became a wife and mother.

The last time she played at the Rod Laver Arena in 2017, she dispatched her older sister Venus in the Australian Open final while pregnant. She did not defend her title last year because she was not ready after a harrowing medical ordeal during and after childbirth.

In her return, 717 days later, she warmed up for her first-round match against Tatjana Maria in a short black trench coat, which she peeled off to reveal a muscle-hugging, bright green shorts-and-tank-top outfit when returning to her chair.

It was a bold fashion statement for the 37-year-old, resurrecting the "Serena-tard," as she called it, which she first made famous in 2002 when she had one of her most sublime seasons, with victories in the French Open, Wimbledon and US Open, and a 56-5 match record.

Williams' 6-0, 6-2 victory against Maria of Germany, her friend and fellow mother, felt like it took place in 2002.

She breezed through the opening set in 18 minutes and won 54 points to Maria's 24. Williams, the 16th seed, produced 22 winners.

"I knew that I've been working really, really hard in the off-season to be incredibly fit," said the American, who can equal Margaret Court's record 24 Grand Slam singles titles with a victory here.

"I have been going for the record for what seems like forever now, so it doesn't feel any different."

"I don't want to give myself a ranking any more. I think it gives me too much negative expectations. I just know that I'm going in the right direction."

Made of jade-green lycra with a black-and-white waistband, the skin-tight outfit looks like a pair of



disco-era hot pants attached to a builder's singlet.

Williams matched it with fishnet stockings, which she explained were a health measure designed to avoid deep-vein thrombosis (DVT).

She almost died in 2017 when blood clots formed in her lungs after she gave birth to her daughter Alexis Olympia.

She said she still lived in fear of the condition returning and wore compression tights to help stop clots forming.

"(I'm) definitely still concerned. I

have had some issues and they're not done. So it's just something I just have to do for pretty much the rest of my career," she said. "But I'm always at the doctor. With DVTs, it's very scary. Especially for me it's incredibly frightening."

She will next play Canadian Eugenie Bouchard, who beat Peng Shuai of China 6-2, 6-1.

Williams also spoke about her dual focus on tennis and 16-month-old Alexis.

"Spending a lot of time with my daughter is a priority for me," she

said. "As a working mum, I feel guilty. I understand that's normal. These are years I'll never get back."

Williams will not get back the time she took off from tennis to have her child. But the best she can do is win the Australian Open title she could not defend last year, and to that end, she got off to a fast start.

NYTIMES,AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Serena Williams serving to Tatjana Maria during her first-round victory at the Australian Open. The American caught the eye with her bright green outfit, as well as her swift dispatching of her 31-year-old German opponent in straight sets 6-0, 6-2. PHOTO: REUTERS

LONDON • Former British Cycling and Team Sky doctor Richard Freeman is to face misconduct charges brought by Britain's General Medical Council, it was announced on Monday.

An independent medical tribunal, which will start on Feb 6, is to hear GMC claims that Freeman was involved in a cover-up after allegedly ordering large quantities of testosterone, a performance-enhancing drug, to be delivered to the National Cycling Centre in 2011. AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Obituaries

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Jo Har Kaa Piaaraa So Sabhnaa Kaa Piaaraa
One who is dear to the Lord, is dear to all;



MATAJI GIAN KAUR
w/o Late Mukhtiar Singh
(Village: Chukawa)

Age: 87

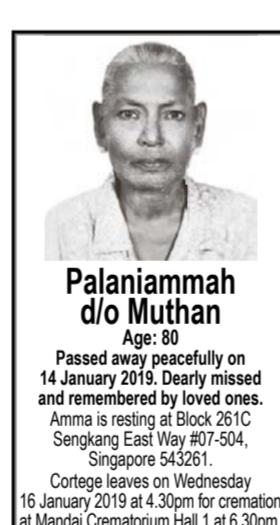
passed away peacefully on 15 Jan 2019. Dearly missed by Brother & Spouse, Sister, Sons, Daughter-in-law, Daughters, Sons-in-law, Grandchildren, Great-grandchildren, Nephews, Nieces, Caregiver, relatives & friends in Singapore & overseas.

Cortege will leave on 17 Jan 2019, Thurs at 2.45pm from CGH for Mandai Crematorium Hall 1. Cremation ceremony will commence at 4.15pm. Buses will leave Khalsa Dharmak Sabha, Niven Rd at 2.45pm. Tel: 94256867 Harddeep / 83899557 Pernjitt.

Akand Path prayers will be held on 18 Jan 2019, Fri at Khalsa Dharmak Sabha from 12 noon onwards. Path Da Bhog on 20 Jan 2019, Sun from 12 noon onwards.

Please treat this as a personal invitation.

The family also wish to express their heartfelt thanks and appreciation to relatives and friends for their kind assistance, condolences & blessings.



Palaniammah
d/o Muthan

Age: 80
Passed away peacefully on 14 January 2019. Dearly missed and remembered by loved ones. Amma is resting at Block 261C, Sengkang East Way #07-504, Singapore 543261. Cortege leaves on Wednesday 16 January 2019 at 4.30pm for cremation at Mandai Crematorium Hall 1 at 6.30pm. Contact Mr Appu at 9671 5704

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and the sharing of pleasures.
For in the dear of little things the heart finds
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Kahlil Gibran

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life

D

'GIVE ME THE ROLE'
How actor
Mahershala Ali
landed the lead
in crime series
True Detective

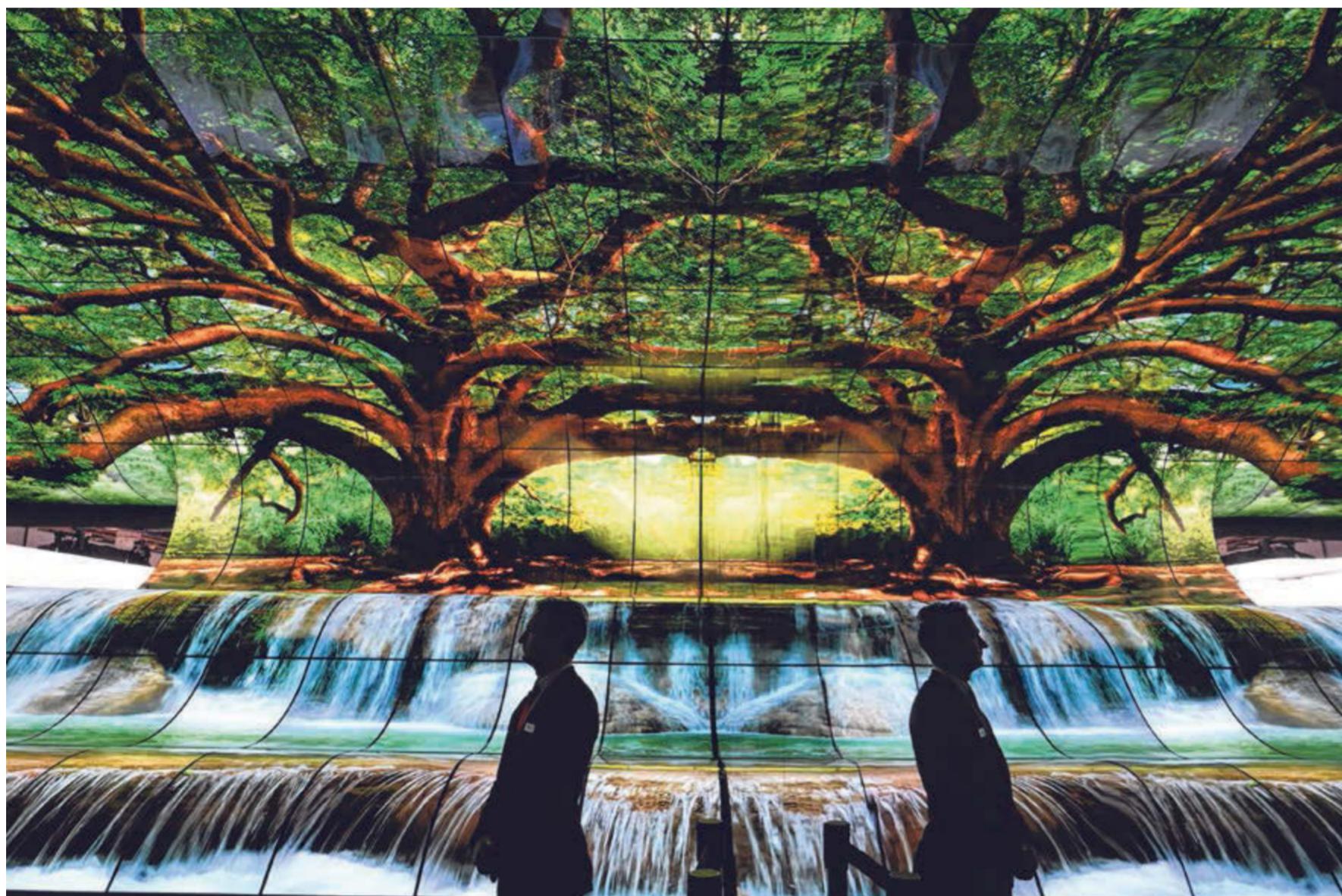
D8



You get in life
what you
have the courage
to ask for.

– Oprah Winfrey

live more,
bank less

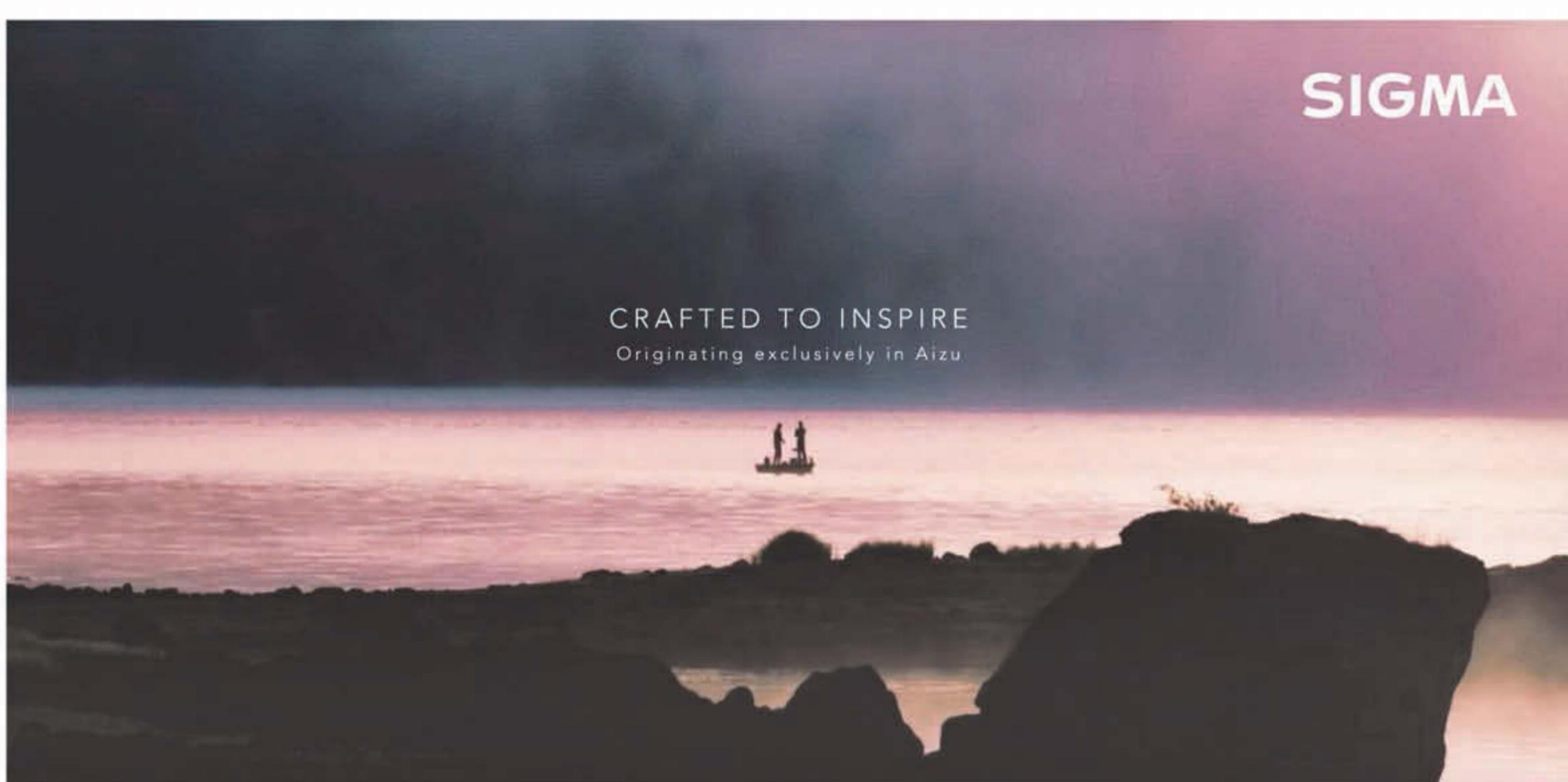


DESIGN: SALLY LAM PHOTOS: AGENCIE FRANCE-PRESSE

The future is A.I.

Mirrors that identify faces and voice-activated pet cameras starred at this year's consumer electronics trade fair in Las Vegas. Trevor Tan reports. D2&3

A display of 250 curved LG OLED televisions reflected in a mirror at CES 2019.



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CES in Las Vegas

Enter a world of artificial intelligence

AI was everywhere at the consumer electronics trade fair, from gadgets to digital voice assistants



Trevor Tan
In Las Vegas

The bedside lamp lights up gradually 30 minutes before your morning alarm is set to go off.

After being roused from your sleep, you say "Good Morning" and the bathroom lights turn on immediately. As you get dressed for work in front of the mirror, it recognises who you are and starts displaying newsfeed customised for you.

These scenarios were among the numerous artificial intelligence (AI) showcases at last week's CES in Las Vegas, the world's largest consumer electronics trade fair.

From a press preview presentation of tech sales and forecasts by CES 2019 organiser Consumer Technology Association (CTA) to the keynotes by different technology firms, AI was a topic constantly mentioned.

Mr Thomas Husson, vice-president

and principal analyst at research firm Forrester, defines AI as "a system of capabilities for machines to interact, think or mimic human intelligence and engagement", which helps automate tasks and improves employee and customer experience.

"While it is early days yet and there is a lot more innovation to come, AI is increasingly embedded everywhere and will increasingly have many new uses," said Mr Husson.

On the CES 2019 show floor, there were plenty of gadgets utilising AI for better user experience.

For example, wearable company Vivint's latest fitness classes, called Blazin', is the first part of Alexa-compatible smart glasses. Vivint is also looking into adding Google Assistant to the Blazin'.

Pet-device maker PetCube joined the voice-assistant bandwagon and announced two smart pet cameras that let pet owners use Alexa commands to throw treats to their pets.

"With customers demanding instantaneous response and easily distracted, AI is seen by companies as a solution to increase engagement and retain customers," said Mr Loo Wee Teck, research firm Euromonitor International's head of consumer electronics.

Amazon has the Alexa Connect Kit, while Google has the Google Assistant Compact Kit for devices like speakers and televisions.

"AI development is now democratised and available to start-ups, not just for multinational companies with deep pockets," said Mr Loo.

For consumers, AI will primarily be in the form of digital voice assistants, such as Amazon Alexa, Apple Siri, Google Assistant and Samsung Bixby, as well as in smart appliances, such as smart speakers, and smart homes.

Digital assistants will be going into everything from home appliances to cars, said Ms Lesley Rohrbough, CTA's director of market research.

There is definitely "a shift in consumer behaviour to voice", according to a study last year by CTA on US adults about the use of digital assistants. "Voice is quickly becoming the go-to interface as it is very easy to interact with it," said Ms Rohrbough.

On the eve of CES 2019, Google announced that Google Assistant is now available on one billion devices, after Amazon declared that it has more than 100 million devices running Alexa.

At the show, Google had a booth three times the size of what it had last year. The booth showed off Google Assistant's capabilities in a home setting as well as a "Disney-like" ride that features Google Assistant helping.

According to Mr Loo, a key reason for the blossoming of AI is tech giants Amazon and Google making the application programming interface of their AI readily available to third parties.

Matrix has the Matrix PowerWatch 2, which is a smartwatch that you do not have to charge. This is what the Matrix PowerWatch 2 is promising.

While the original PowerWatch is already self-powered by a thermoelectric generator that harvests the wearer's body heat to feed the battery, the PowerWatch 2 has updated the antenna.

Aimed at professional film-makers who want the highest quality, the Titan IIK comes with eight 200-degree f/3.2 lenses - each accompanied by a Micro Four Thirds (MFT) image sensor. Thus, it uses eight MFT image sensors to capture images and stills them together to deliver 3D photos and videos of up to 11K resolution.

Specifically, it shoots 3D videos at 1K or 10K resolution at 30 frames per second (fps), 8K resolution at 60fps and 5.3K resolution at 120fps.

It requires a whopping nine high-speed SD cards - one for each of the eight cameras to capture images and one to store gyroscopic metadata.

Furthermore, the Elite 85h is said to have a battery life of 32 hours with ANC activated. Pretty impressive.

Gadgets you can soon buy



1
LG Signature Oled TV R
Singapore pricing and availability to be confirmed, available in the US this year



2
Alienware Area-51m Legend
Singapore pricing to be confirmed, available next month



3
Matrix PowerWatch 2
US\$499 (S\$675), available in April

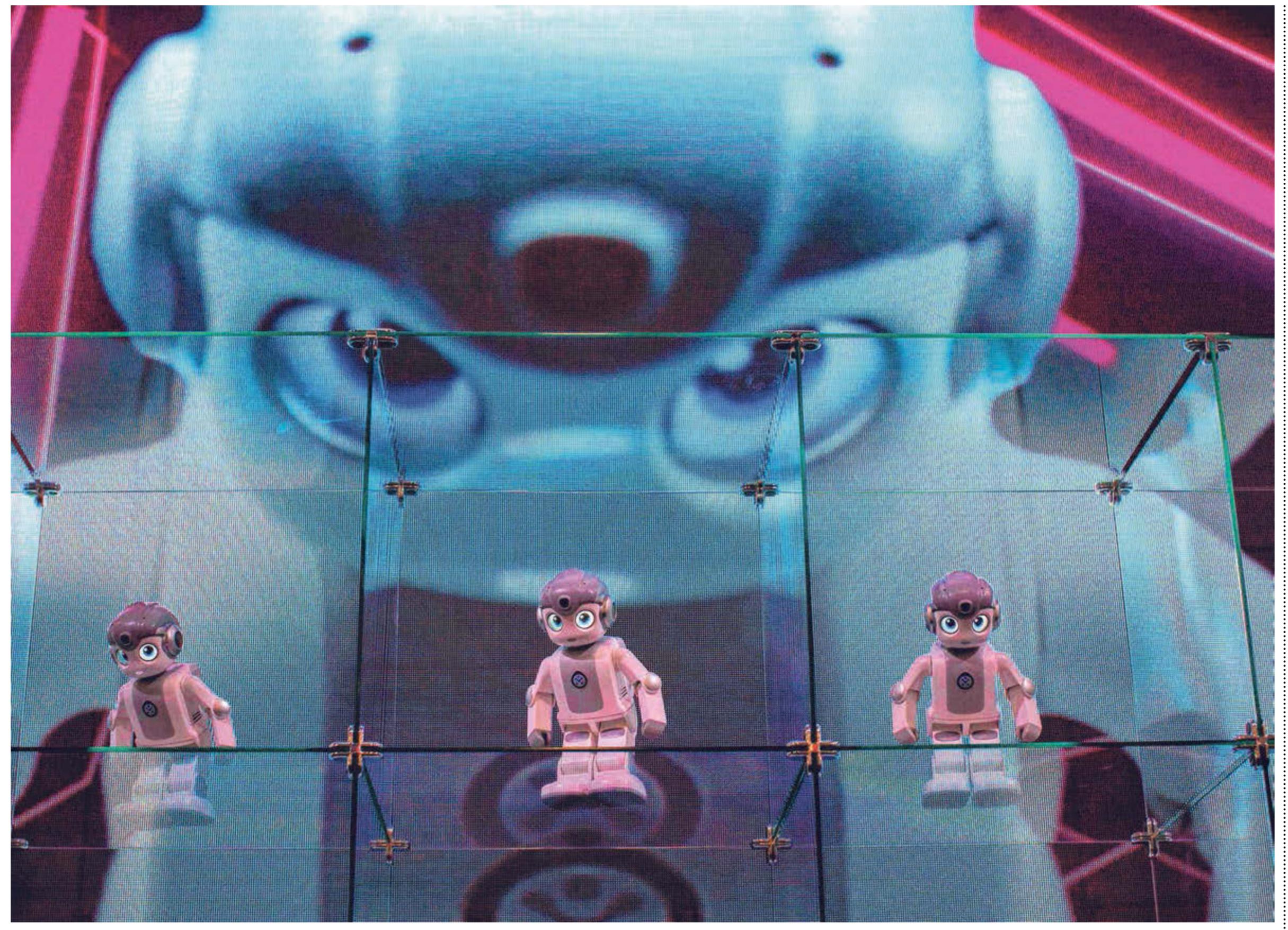


4
Insta360 Titan IIK
US\$14,999 (S\$20,000), available in April



5
Jabra Elite 85h
US\$299 (Singapore pricing to be confirmed), available in April

Tons of gadgets and gizmos were on display at CES 2019 last week. While many are concept products that are unlikely to see the light of day, here are five that will be released in the market in the coming months



Alpha Mini robots (above) that use artificial intelligence to dance and the Google Assistant Ride (left) at the Google Assistant Playground at CES 2019. PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, BLOOMBERG



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PC

Sturdy ZenBook with numeric touchpad

Asus' ZenBook 14 (UX433) ultrabook has a touchpad that doubles as a numeric keypad, as well as a well-built frame weighing a mere 1.lkg

Vincent Chang

Asus is not done experimenting with the touchpad.

The Taiwanese PC-maker came up with the ScreenPad – a touchpad that functions as a second screen – on last year's ZenBook Pro.

Its latest twist on the touchpad is dubbed the NumberPad and available on the ZenBook 14 (UX433) ultrabook, introduced last month.

As its name suggests, the ZenBook 14's touchpad doubles as a numeric keypad, a feature that is usually missing from compact laptops.

Press and hold the keypad icon at the top right corner and the touchpad lights up with the numbers and symbols you would find on a standard number pad.

Probably because its functionality is simple and straightforward, the NumberPad is not as buggy or as unresponsive as the ScreenPad.

Of course, the NumberPad is also less useful than the ScreenPad,

though those doing data entry will appreciate this feature.

I like how compact and light (1.lkg) the ZenBook feels in my hands. Asus says it is built to military standards – it certainly seems more sturdy than the typical ultrabook despite not having a unibody design.

Adorning its brushed aluminium lid is the signature look of ZenBooks – a pattern of concentric circles representing water ripples.

My review set in royal blue looks nice until my greasy hands touch it and create a mess of smudges.

The 14-inch screen is surrounded by very slim bezels. To my surprise, Asus still manages, despite the narrow top bezel, to fit an infrared camera above the screen for face recognition.

The display has a matt finish, which reduces glare. I would have liked the screen to be brighter, though I have no complaints about its viewing angles or contrast, which are excellent.

When the lid is open, the key-



board is slightly raised at an angle, a design seen on some older ZenBooks. It helps to improve the typing ergonomics.

The keyboard offers decent key travel (1.4mm), with a slight amount of flex in the middle. It is backlit, with three different levels of brightness.

Its connectors are a mixed bag. A USB 3.1 Gen 2 Type-C port offers speeds of up to 10Gbps, but it is not as fast as Thunderbolt 3 (40Gbps). I like that it has an HDMI port because I do not like to carry a dongle. But I cannot understand why it still has a slow USB 2.0 port.

Powering the ZenBook is Intel's latest Core i7 chip, along with a generous 16GB of system memory. My higher-end review set (\$1,898) comes with Nvidia's entry-level GeForce MX150 graphics chip, which is slightly better than the built-in graphics from the Intel processor.

The cheaper version of the ZenBook 14 (\$1,598) comes without the GeForce chip while the memory

and storage are also downsized from the higher-end model.

My review set managed a score of 4,240 in the PCMark 10 system benchmark. This is similar to that of the Razer Blade Stealth, which has almost the same hardware.

Its cooling fan runs quietly while I play videos or browse the Internet.

However, the bottom of the ZenBook feels warm even while performing basic computing tasks. And it quickly becomes uncomfortable to touch when running a game.

Battery stamina has steadily improved with newer laptops and the ZenBook 14 manages a respectable 7½ hours in the video-loop battery test at maximum brightness and volume.

• Verdict: The latest ZenBook adds a clever numeric keypad as well as a more sturdy build. But it feels warm to the touch even when performing basic tasks.

vinchang@sph.com.sg

Portable and ideal for casual users

Vincent Chang

Remember netbooks? Those dinky little laptops with cramped keyboards, small screens and middling performance that were all the rage more than a decade ago?

Microsoft's Surface Go, with its modest 10-inch screen, is like an improved netbook, but with a modern twist. Like its larger Surface Pro sibling, the Surface Go can switch between tablet and laptop forms. Simply add or remove its detachable keyboard accessory.

Improvements in computing hardware since the netbook's heyday mean that the Surface Go, with its high-resolution display and fast solid-state drive (SSD), is more usable than netbooks ever were.

But make no mistake, the Surface Go still ranks fairly low on the performance totem. It is powered by Intel's budget Pentium Gold Processor. The entry-level Go comes with 4GB of RAM and 64GB of eMMC storage that runs slower than a typical SSD.

Even my higher-end review set, with 8GB of RAM and a 128GB SSD, is some way off the performance of a typical ultrabook. In the PCMark 10 benchmark, it scored 1,902, compared with 4,240 for a recent ultrabook such as the Asus ZenBook 14.

While it is not ideal for video editing or gaming, the Surface Go is good enough for casual users. Students may find it useful for taking notes with the optional Surface Pen stylus (\$148).

I did not encounter any lag while browsing the Web or streaming videos from YouTube and Netflix. However, I did get the Windows blue screen of death once during my testing, resulting in a restart.

It comes preloaded with Windows 10 in S mode, a locked-down version that only lets you install verified apps from the Windows Store. It means traditional desktop apps such as security app Malwarebytes and the Google Chrome browser are not supported.

It is, however, easy to remove this restriction by switching to the standard Windows 10 edition in the settings, which is what I would recommend. Do note that you cannot switch back to S mode if you change your mind.

The best thing about the Surface Go is the weight. At 520g, its matt grey magnesium chassis is only slightly heavier than Apple's 9.7-inch iPad. It is handy and not awkward to hold, unlike 16.9 tablets. Including its Type Cover



SPECs

PRICE: \$828

PROCESSOR: Intel Pentium Gold Processor 4415Y (1.6GHz)

GRAPHICS: Intel HD Graphics 615

RAM: 8GB DDR3

SCREEN SIZE: 10 inches, 1,800 x 1,200 pixels

CONNECTIVITY: USB Type-C, Surface Connect port, MicroSD card slot, headphone jack

BATTERY: 26.12 watt-hour

RATING

FEATURES: 4/5

DESIGN: 4/5

PERFORMANCE: 3/5

VALUE FOR MONEY: 4/5

BATTERY LIFE: 4/5

OVERALL: 4/5

keyboard (from \$138), the Surface Go weighs 770g, which is lighter than most laptops.

The cover magnetically attaches to the Surface Go with a satisfying snap. The attraction is strong enough that I could hold the device upside down by its keyboard cover without worrying the tablet would break free and fall to the ground.

The keyboard feels slightly narrow and flexes in the middle. I ended up mostly pecking at the keys using two fingers, though I

could maintain a passable typing rate of 60 words per minute. The decently sized touchpad is as wide as the spacebar.

With chunky bezels around the display, the Surface Go can look old-fashioned next to modern laptops with near-bezel-less screens. But the thick bezels reduce accidental screen touches while gripping the device. It also means ample room for a front-facing infrared camera that supports the Windows Hello facial-recognition feature.

It comes with a single USB Type-C port – most users will need a dongle for their external storage devices. But the upside is that, in addition to using its bundled charger to charge the Go (via the proprietary Surface Connect port), you can also charge the device via the USB Type-C port.

In the video-loop battery test, the Surface Go lasted six hours with the screen set at maximum brightness. Given its modest battery, this is a decent duration, though the latest notebooks can go seven hours or more on a single charge.

Although the base model costs an attractive \$618, I recommend the higher-end model (\$828) reviewed here, which is still cheaper than the iPad Pro or Surface Pro. Factor in the cost of the accessories and the Surface Go will set you back by as much as a lower mid-range notebook, which is wholly acceptable.

• Verdict: Putting portability and price over performance, the Surface Go offers adequate performance for less-demanding users.

Mesh router provides reliable and stable Wi-Fi

Vincent Chang

The MR2200ac is only the third Wi-Fi router from Taiwanese firm Synology – known for its network-attached storage (NAS) devices – since 2015.

It supports mesh networking, a feature that links multiple MR2200ac units together so as to cast a wider Wi-Fi net than a single router can.

A single MR2200ac router will suffice for those with smaller homes measuring 2,000 sq ft or less, says Synology.

If you have Synology's previous RT2600ac router, it can be used together with the MR2200ac in a mesh network. But the RT2600ac must be the primary router that connects to the Internet modem, with additional MR2200ac units connecting to the RT2600ac.

Synology says the MR2200ac is the first WPA3-certified router in the market. WPA or Wi-Fi Protected Access is a security protocol for wireless networks.

A benefit of the WPA3 standard: It can mitigate the impact of weak Wi-Fi passwords by protecting against brute-force attacks. But client devices also have to support WPA3 to enjoy its benefits and there are currently few of them, seeing as WPA3 was released only last year.

The MR2200ac is designed to stand upright and cannot be mounted to the wall. The antennas are hidden inside a black and plain plastic chassis.

Its LED indicators – three lines of varying lengths that remind me of the Wi-Fi symbol – are a nice touch. Their colours vary, depending on the status of the router – for instance, a solid red for an error and a solid blue when it is booting up.

It has just two Gigabit LAN ports, which is typical of a mesh router. For a MR2200ac unit designated to be the primary router, one LAN port is always connected to the Internet modem, thus leaving just one free port.

It has a USB 3.0 port to attach an external storage device to back up data from computers in the network, or to a printer.

It has three wireless bands – two 5GHz bands and one 2.4GHz band

SPECs

PRICE: \$1,898

PROCESSOR: Intel Core i7-8565 (1.8GHz)

GRAPHICS: Nvidia GeForce MX150 2GB GDDR5

RAM: 16GB DDR3

SCREEN SIZE: 14 inches, 1,920 x 1,080 pixels

CONNECTIVITY: USB 3.1 Gen 2 Type-C, Type-C, USB 3.1 Gen 1 Type-A, USB 2.0, HDMI, microSD card slot, audio jack

BATTERY: 50 watt-hour

OVERALL: 4/5

RATING

FEATURES: 4/5

DESIGN: 4/5

PERFORMANCE: 4/5

VALUE FOR MONEY: 4/5

BATTERY LIFE: 5/5

OVERALL: 4/5



enough, though the MR2200ac can take a while to restart and apply the changes made during the set-up process.

The app is probably less intimidating to novices, though the browser interface, which takes after a desktop operating system, is definitely more intuitive than most router user interfaces.

Optional features such as a VPN server can be added to the MR2200ac via an app-store-like interface.

It comes with comprehensive parental controls that let users restrict the amount of time online for each client device, as well as customise filters to block undesirable websites.

A Network Protection feature is available to prevent users from accessing known malicious websites based on Google's Safe Browsing database. The router even lets you create a custom block page to inform users that they are being prevented from accessing the Internet.

I found that a pair of MR2200ac working as a mesh network offers sufficient coverage for my home. There were no Wi-Fi blind spots and the signal strength was adequate even in the farthest bedroom (with the door closed).

In my testing, the MR2200ac achieved an average download speed of 320Mbps between two laptops a few metres apart in the same room as the primary router. This dropped to 120Mbps in the bedroom.

At \$199 each, creating a mesh network with multiple MR2200ac units may cost more than other mesh routers that are sold as a bundle of two or three. But neither is it the most expensive model in the market.

Its user-friendly yet powerful interface more than justifies its price.

• Verdict: Synology's first mesh router performs well and offers a powerful yet easy-to-use interface.

Wearables

Smartwatch with a few extras

Casio's ProTrek WSD-F30 has a digital compass, barometer and altimeter – features not often seen in smartwatches

Trevor Tan

The Casio ProTrek WSD-F30 is the improved version of the 2017 WSD-F20. It is the third generation of Casio's rugged ProTrek outdoor smartwatch, which runs on Google's Wear OS smartwatch operating system.

The F30 has been tested to meet the United States military standard of ruggedness. It is water-resistant to 50m and can withstand temperatures as low as -10 deg C.

It has a built-in digital compass, barometer and altimeter – features not often seen in smartwatches. It also features offline maps.

In terms of design, the F30 does not differ much from its predecessors.

It has a sturdy metallic watch case (available in black, blue and orange – the version tested) with a black resin bezel and black rubber strap. The strap feels very comfortable and features more holes for greater adjustment and fit.

On the watch case's left, there is a charging port and the barometric/altitude sensors. On its right, there are three buttons – for Map (top), home/back (middle) and Tool (bottom).

The F30's watch case is 1.2mm shorter, 3.9mm narrower and 0.4mm thinner than the F20's. The F30 is also 8g lighter (inclusive of the watch strap). Nonetheless, the F30 is still big compared with other smartwatches. And its rugged looks mean it is not a watch to wear to black-tie events.

The F30 continues to use the series' unique dual-layer screen of

monochrome (for time-keeping) and colour (for smartwatch functions) LCDs, though its 1.2-inch screen is slightly smaller than F20's 1.32-inch (320 x 320 pixels) screen.

But the F30's display has a higher resolution of 390 x 390 pixels that shows maps in finer details.

Furthermore, it is a full round touchscreen and no longer sports the "flat tyre" design (or the dark area at the screen's bottom) of the F20.

Pressing the Tool button toggles the display for the digital compass, barometric readings, altitude readings and sunrise/sunset timings.

The digital compass pointed to the same north direction as my military compass, while the altitude readings were pretty much spot on. I drove to the peak of Mount Faber to get a reading. And I found the F30's reading to be 112m – not far from Mount Faber's height of 105m.

Pressing the Map button will activate a colour map of your location. While it took about 20 seconds for the F20 to load and show the map of the user's current location, it took less than five seconds with the F30.

You can mark the map with icons along a route. For instance, you can mark your start point with a star icon, so you know how to make your way back. You can also add a voice memo to remind yourself about a particular location you have marked.

Unfortunately, like its predecessors, the F30 lacks a heart-rate monitor that is standard in most new smartwatches. So you will not know how hard your heart is pumping when using the watch to track your workouts. It is a shame as the F30 could have doubled up as a fitness watch.

In terms of steps tracking, the F30 counted about 8 per cent fewer steps than my calibrated Apple Watch Series 4. But it was more accurate in tracking my runs via



GPS. On my usual 5km jogging route, its readings were only 100m less than the actual distance.

Battery life is rated at 1½ days in smartwatch mode.

However, in my tests, with the watch constantly paired with a smartphone and with notifications turned on, there was still 30 per cent battery by the end of the second day.

Pretty impressive.

You can also switch to Multi Time-piece Mode, which shows altitude and atmospheric pressure readings in monochrome, but with a supposedly one-month battery life.

However, I am disappointed that the F30 lacks solar-power capability, since it is targeted at the outdoorsman.

The biggest downer, though, is its

SPECS

PRICE: \$749, available from Friday

CONNECTIVITY: Bluetooth, Wi-Fi

COMPATIBILITY: Smartphones running Android 4.4 and above or iOS 9.3 and above

WATER RESISTANCE: 50m

WEIGHT: 83g

RATING

FEATURES: 3/5

DESIGN: 4/5

PERFORMANCE: 4/5

BATTERY LIFE: 4/5

VALUE FOR MONEY: 2.5/5

OVERALL: 3.5/5

Gaming

Alienware m15 set for major upgrade



Vincent Chang

Dell announced new hardware upgrades for its 15-inch Alienware m15 gaming laptop last week at the CES trade show in Las Vegas.

This was around the time that I received my m15 review set – not the newer version, but the one launched here at the end of last year.

Understandably, the announcement casts my review set in a different light. After all, the 2019 version is getting a major performance boost. For one thing, it offers a new six-core Intel processor. But more importantly, it can be configured with Nvidia's latest GeForce RTX 20 Series of graphics chips, including the flagship RTX 2080 model.

There is also a new display option for a 4K screen that supports high-dynamic-range games and videos.

In comparison, the m15 I tested is powered by an older Intel chip and Nvidia's last-generation GeForce GTX 1070 (Max-Q) graphics chip.

Dell says the new m15 will be available in the United States at the end of the month, though there is no indication when it will launch here.

But while no longer the shiny new toy, the current m15 is far from shabby – its graphics hardware is on a par with other gaming laptops.

My review set has been souped up with the highest-end options, including a 4K (3,840 x 2,160 pixels) display. The matte screen is bright, has very good viewing angles and looks vibrant. But it comes with a 60Hz refresh rate, making it less suitable for gaming than the cheaper 1,920 x 1,080-pixel, 144Hz screen option. I would take that over the 4K display any day.

Surrounding the display are relatively thin bezels at the sides, but

the top and bottom ones remain thick.

Both the old and new m15 have a similar design, one billed by Alienware as its thinnest laptop. However, given that its gaming laptops have usually been chunky, the bar is set rather low. The m15 is 21mm thick – slim, but hardly groundbreaking for a gaming laptop. It is also not the lightest at 2.16kg.

It is still recognisably an Alienware gaming laptop, with its sharp angles and exhaust vents. It is also hard to miss the trademark alien logo on the lid. Build quality is good, with nary a creak from its chassis.

It has a clicky and tactile keyboard, while the palm rest has a soft-touch finish that feels smooth. But I was disappointed that it does not have per-key RGB backlighting, a feature available on even mid-range gaming laptops nowadays. Instead, the keyboard has six lighting zones, customisable via the Alienware Command Center app.

The keyboard gets fairly warm while the laptop is running at full throttle. The noise from the cooling fan becomes noticeable, though not as loud or annoying as the din from some gaming laptops. But the area above the keyboard becomes too warm to touch for more than a few seconds – I would not recommend placing the laptop on your lap.

The m15 performed very well in gaming tests, scoring 93 frames per second (fps) in Crysis 3 at 1,920 x 1,080 pixels with graphical settings at maximum. In Doom (2016), the m15 managed 117fps.

If you need more graphical horsepower, the m15, like recent Alienware laptops, can connect to the Alienware Graphics Amplifier, an external graphics enclosure that houses a desktop graphics card

(sold separately) via a proprietary port. Alternatively, a third-party external graphics enclosure such as the Razer Core should also work using the Thunderbolt 3 port.

• **Verdict:** While it is expensive and not as thin as its rivals, the m15 does perform to expectations. But as it is due for a hardware refresh in the next month or two, it is probably best to adopt a wait-and-see approach.

SPECS

PRICE: \$5,564

PROCESSOR: Intel Core i7-8750H (2.2GHz)

GRAPHICS: Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070 with Max-Q design 8GB GDDR5

RAM: 32GB DDR4

SCREEN SIZE: 15.6 inches, 3,840 x 2,160 pixels

CONNECTIVITY: Thunderbolt 3, 3 x USB 3.0, HDMI 2.0, mini-DisplayPort, Alienware Graphics Amplifier port, Ethernet port, audio jack

BATTERY: 60 watt-hour

RATING

FEATURES: 5/5

DESIGN: 3/5

PERFORMANCE: 4.5/5

VALUE FOR MONEY: 2/5

BATTERY LIFE: 1/5

OVERALL: 4/5

price. At \$749, it is on the high side, especially when an Apple Watch Series 4 smartwatch starts at \$599.

• **Verdict:** If you are looking for a rugged outdoor smartwatch, the Casio ProTrek WSD-F30 is a great choice. If not, there are cheaper and better options in the market.

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Commentary

Apple was at CES without being there

Tech giant stole the show at the consumer electronics fair as manufacturers such as Samsung and LG announced that their latest TVs will come with AirPlay 2 and HomeKit



Trevor Tan

Apple has not participated in the annual CES consumer electronics trade fair for more than a quarter of a century. But despite not being there again this year, its presence was certainly felt.

The Cupertino tech giant cheekily placed a huge billboard staring down at Las Vegas Convention Center, one of the main venues of CES, saying "What happens on your iPhone, stays on your iPhone".

It is a cute play of words on the famous Las Vegas slogan, "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas". It highlights Apple's emphasis on privacy while delivering an underhand jibe at its competitors such as Google and Facebook, which have been in the limelight for selling users' data.

It makes for a chuckle whenever the Las Vegas monorail plastered with a "Hey, Google" advertisement went by the billboard.

Jokes aside, Apple's presence was felt during the press conferences and on the show floors of the event.

Samsung's announcement that its latest TVs will have a native Apple iTunes app was mind-blowing, considering Samsung TVs run on Samsung's proprietary Tizen operating system (OS).

The TVs will also support Apple's AirPlay 2 streaming protocol. This means iPhone and iPad users can stream their videos or music to the new Samsung TV without the need of an Apple TV streaming box.

LG, Vizio and Sony also announced at the show that they will support AirPlay 2 on their latest TVs. This means AirPlay 2 will work on Tizen OS (Samsung), webOS (LG) and Android TV OS (Vizio and Sony).

In addition, LG, Vizio and Sony will add Apple's HomeKit support to not only their latest TVs, but also older TVs via a software upgrade.

With HomeKit support, iPhone and iPad users will be able to turn on the TV as well as change the TV's input source. There is no need to use the remote control. Also, depending on the implementation of AirPlay 2 and HomeKit support on the TV, iPhone and iPad users might be able to control the TV using Apple's Siri voice assistant.

Mr Thomas Husson, vice-president and principal analyst of research firm Forrester, found the

most interesting bit of CES to be Apple "taking a more open approach to entertainment partnering with LG and Samsung on AirPlay".

Creative Strategies analyst Ben Bajarin tweeted last week that the "story of CES may be its growth in HomeKit/Siri/Airplay 2 support".

Considering how Apple has fiercely safeguarded its walled garden in the past, I feel Apple's change of heart is a major paradigm shift.

It shows that Apple now considers its services to be pivotal in keeping its margins healthy, as the global demand for smartphones wanes and the impact of trade war hits home.

Remember there was a time when iTunes was available only on the Mac and thus hindered iPod sales, as the majority of the world uses Windows PC?

We might be seeing that same moment with TVs this time, as Apple begins to offer more original video content on iTunes and starts its rumoured video-streaming service.

Perhaps, one might wonder why the TV makers would be willing to adopt Apple's technology. It is simple – they want to sell more TVs.

And there are many iPhone and iPad users out there who will be more than willing to buy a TV with AirPlay 2 and HomeKit support. Everybody wins.

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A Las Vegas monorail train with a "Hey, Google" advertisement going past a billboard with an Apple advertisement at Las Vegas Convention Center during the CES.
ST PHOTO: TREVOR TAN

Gaming

Entertaining alien-invasion shooter



Nizam Mohd

The year is 2022 and Earth is under attack from aliens. You are a civilian visitor at a military base that is invaded unexpectedly by monstrous life forms. As you and others fight your way to safety, you prove your worth and are recruited to become part of the Earth Defense Force.

The premise of Earth Defense Force 5 – available only on PS4 – will be familiar and pleasing to fans of the long-running shooter game series, which debuted in 2003 as a compilation of budget titles and has been released on various gaming platforms over the years.

Missions can be played offline, online with three other players or in split-screen mode with one player. You can switch among four classes – ranger, wing diver, air raider and fencer – with each class possessing unique weapons and capabilities.

Completing missions will unlock random enhancements and arsenal for the classes. Apart from gaining new types of ordnance, you can also unlock various modes of transport.

There are more than 100 missions to conquer over five difficulty levels, so players may have to vary their strategies and approaches as they progress. The lower difficulty stages are more forgiving while the higher difficulty stages offer better rewards.

There are 13 types of encounters, from colonies of insects such as red ants, spiders, beetles and wasps, to creatures like humanoid frogs, spacesuit aliens and towering monsters. The extraterrestrial life forms are teleported through giant pylons and from ominous-looking space-ships.

Your radar will show up any threats as red blips, which will grow quickly if left unchecked. Downed entities tend to drop crates that boost your health, armour or weapon. You achieve success on clearing desired goals, though the fight carries over to the next episode. You have to be vigilant or you may be outnumbered if you are complacent.

The game runs without stutter even as the battlefield becomes crowded on screen. Developer Sandlot is known for prioritising game performance over everything else, which is probably why the visuals appear scaled down. While the graphics look sharp and have improved over the years, this aspect is not a strong feature of the franchise.

Dedication is key to becoming proficient here, as players will be doing plenty of weapon farming, grinding and levelling up.

On the plus side, the limited options to personalise your character's outfit colours as well as animate your character – in the way it communicates, screams, sings, poses and more – help keep things fresh. There are also interesting vehicle liveries that can be purchased online to make your tanks and transports look unique.

For me, the simple shoot-all-you-can mechanics, cheesy dialogue and bite-sized missions make for decent entertainment at the end of a long day. I wish there are subtitles though, so that I do not have to turn up the volume to enjoy the audio.

• **Verdict:** Earth Defense Force 5 is an entertaining shooter with a fun premise that harkens back to classic alien invasion movies.

• Nizam Mohd is a freelance writer

SPECS

PRICE: From \$379.90 (PS4 only)

GENRE: Third-person action shooter

RATING

7/10

New Products



LG gram 14
ULTRABOOK

\$1,799

Looking for an ultrabook for productivity on the go? Consider the latest LG gram 14. Its magnesium-alloy chassis weighs less than 1kg and measures 14.5mm at its thinnest.

Despite having a 14-inch display, the gram 14 is the same size as a conventional 13-inch laptop due to its ultra-thin bezel. The Ultrabook also comes with all the ports you would need, including an HDMI port, a microSD card slot, a headphone jack, a USB-C port and three USB 3.0 ports.



Asus Mini PC ProArt PA90
DESKTOP COMPUTER

Pricing and availability to be confirmed

With a compact footprint measuring 17.6cm x 17.6cm and standing at 36.5cm tall, the new Asus Mini PC ProArt PA90 delivers professional workstation performance without the bulk of conventional workstations.

It is equipped with the latest ninth-generation Intel Core i7 or i9 processors, Nvidia Quadro P2000 or P4000 graphics processing unit and up to 64GB of system memory for heavy-duty work like computer-aided design and video editing.

In addition, its two Thunderbolt 4 ports are each fast enough to transfer a full 4K movie in less than 30 seconds.



Casio Baby-G BGD-525-7D
WATCH

\$139, available by next month

Casio launched its Baby-G brand in 1994 to fulfil the need for a smaller rugged G-Shock watch to fit the slimmer wrists of women. To commemorate the 25th year of Baby-G's first model DW-520, Casio has released the Baby-G BGD-525-7D 25th Anniversary Edition.

It is a reprise of the original DW-520, with a similar white case and translucent white band design, but this one includes the Baby-G logo that was missing from the first model.



Sony PS4 Pro Kingdom Hearts III Limited Edition
GAMING CONSOLE

\$679, available from Jan 29

Are you a die-hard Kingdom Hearts fan who has been waiting for more than a decade for the third main iteration of the video game series to be released? Celebrate its launch by getting the Sony PS4 Pro Kingdom Hearts III Limited Edition.

This gaming console's top cover features a black lace design decorated with familiar Kingdom Hearts iconography, such as the heart shape, the crown and the Keyblade weapon. The included DualShock 4 wireless controller's touchpad sports similar patterns.



Canon LX-MH502Z
LASER PROJECTOR

\$9,000

The Canon LX-MH502Z is a high-end single-chip 4K UHD (3,840 x 2,160 pixels) laser projector.

Featuring a four-way pixel shift technology, the projector's advanced laser phosphor light source generates up to 5,000 lumens for bright and sharp projections. Furthermore, the laser light source has an estimated lifespan of 20,000 hours, thus helping to keep costs down and minimising the need for maintenance.



Asics Gel-Nimbus 21
RUNNING SHOES

\$259, available on Friday

Designed for neutral runners, the Asics Gel-Nimbus 21 features the Japanese sports company's latest cushioning technologies – Flytefoam Propel and Flytefoam Lyte.

The Propel mid-sole delivers a strong rebound on impact for springy runs, while the Lyte compound in the mid-sole consists of cellulose nano-fibres for increased durability. In addition, Asics' 20-year-old GEL cushioning technology boosts both the forefoot and heel areas to help reduce impact and shock.

Compiled by Trevor Tan

Storing solutions for digital photos

There are many storage options, but you need to keep an eye on them to make sure things are not out of date

NEW YORK • In 2005, Yahoo, which already had a photo site called Yahoo! Photos, acquired Flickr, a popular photo portal.

In 2007, it said it would discontinue its own photo service and that users should move their photos to Flickr.

In 2013, Flickr users were told they would have a terabyte of space – for most folk, an unlimited amount – to store images for free.

By then, digital cameras had gone mainstream. People were taking more photos, but it was not clear where they were meant to end up.

Last year, Flickr was sold to SmugMug, a smaller rival. The news came with a new storage limit: 1,000 photos. Users could begin paying or take the rest elsewhere.

And it is now 2019. Do you know

where your photos are? Most people do not, at least not exactly or in terms that they fully understand.

The issue of what to do with ballooning digital photo collections is perhaps the great unsolved tech support question of the last 30 years.

"The thing I've come across with my clients is not necessarily 'How do I store them?', but 'How do I move them to the newest application?'" said Kaitlyn Akron, a 17-year-old student who provides tech support for seniors through an organisation called Teeniors.

They worry about accidentally deleting photos from their phones, she added. They are alarmed when they cannot see old images on a new computer.

New and subtler forms of online storage, working in the backgrounds of smartphones, cause particular anxiety. "The storage is not on their phone, but out there on this supposed cloud," said Mr Yannick Hutchinson, 23, a student who also works with Teeniors.

"They're like, 'Well, where is it?'" Now, with services such as iCloud, the tech industry is promising people all the space they need.

ing people all the space they need. This time, however, it has barely felt the need to hard-sell.

But in a world where images are increasingly created on smartphones, the question of where all this media will go in the future has been shoved aside.

If you use an iPhone, every picture can be uploaded to Apple's servers, until you run out of free space, at which point you will need to start deleting things or rent some more space from Apple.

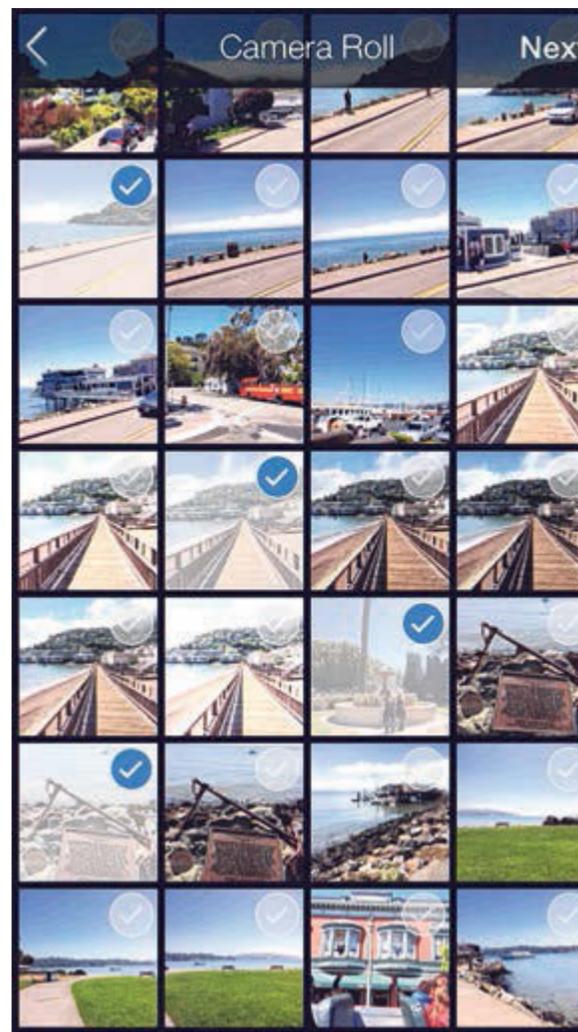
Google promises unlimited free "storage".

Apple proactively processes a phone's images into categories: around dates or places; of particular people, whom it identifies automatically with facial recognition.

Google is more assertive. From your raw imagery, it will automatically edit together a sequence of your child's development.

It will do the same for your dog, whose face it can also recognise.

The prospect of removing your photos and videos from a service such as Google Photo, which provides not just space but also the only interface through which your



The issue of what to do with the ballooning number of digital photos in their collection has become very real for many people. ST PHOTO: TREVOR TAN

personal imagery makes any sense, is worse than daunting.

Ackron's advice for seniors remains practical.

"You always need to keep an eye on where you're storing your photos, to make sure things aren't going out of date," she tells them, describing the process as "tedious" but necessary.

"Technology isn't slowing down."

They have advice for her too.

"Clients talk about how they kept scrapbooks and photo boxes and photo albums, and about how physi-

cally holding the pictures themselves is a different experience."

Now, she said, she prints some favourites of her own.

Beneath the roar of digital acceleration, there is still some shuffling of paper.

An analysis last year by f/22 Consulting, a photo industry firm, noted that a printing business in turmoil has managed to siphon growth from America's bulging camera rolls.

Traditional prints are growing again. NYTIMES



Tokyo-based models and DJs Ami Amiya (far left) and her sister, Aya Amiya (left), follow director Tim Burton on social media. And Ksenia Chilingarova (above) follows the Instagram account of artist Adam Hale.

PHOTOS: TNP FILE, NYTIMES

Who do influencers follow on social media?

FLORENCE (Italy) • Who do the people – whom other people follow on social media – follow?

That question was put to a few of these influencers at the 35th edition of menswear trade show Pitti Uomo, which drew 1,230 brands and nearly 25,000 visitors to Florence over four days last week.

Standing at the counter of cafe Rivoire before the opening of the latest exhibition at the Gucci Garden gallery, Ksenia Chilingarova (@_kchilingarova) – an exhibitor at Pitti Uomo – reeled off a list of contemporary fashion labels and then took a welcome detour into inspired accounts such as @harrynuriev and @the.daily.splice.

The latter is the Instagram account of Adam Hale, a collage artist who takes images from free weekly magazines and upcycles them into meticulously composed and slightly surreal collages that, though they appear to be digitally created, are made with paste and a knife.

Being unplanned, Hale's images combining food and fashion, flowers and landscapes are unpredictable, which is why, as he once noted, "I think it works so well on social media".

The @harrynuriev account belongs to 34-year-old Russian architect and furniture designer Harry Nuriev.

Raised in the Caucasus, trained in Moscow and now based in New York, he is probably best known for his use of unconventional materials (such as a chandelier made from Big pens).

And for his love of saturated colours, such as the pink he used to paint his New York apartment.

"Colours to me are like people," he told The New York Times in 2017.

"When I fall in love, I try to make the relationship work."

For Ms Maria Luisa Frisa, an Italian academic and curator charged with assembling exhibitions for Gucci, Instagram functions like a game of Snakes And Ladders, with individual posts, like rolls of the dice, moving a player back and forth through time.

"The game of appropriation that is fashion goes in two directions, the front and back side of the present," she said.

Mostly her scholarly work takes the upper hand in dictating what she tracks on Instagram.

She follows players in the world of contemporary art. "Frieze and Hans Ulrich Obrist," she said, referring to the Instagram accounts of the influential art fair (@friezeartfair) and director of the Serpentine Galleries in London (@hansulrichobrist).

The wild card in her daily Insta-

gram feed, she said, is probably @prefigured_, an account created by Australia-born, London-based curator Judith Clark, whose eclecticism results in posts as diverse as a commentary on French artist Eugene Delacroix's drawn marginalia and a 1985 cover of John Travolta for Interview magazine.

It can sometimes happen that even those whose following choices seem unsurprising can lead you to unlikely places.

With their matching pink wigs, Gucci outfits and anime faces, Tokyo-based models and DJs Ami Amiya (@amixxamiaya) and her sister, Aya Amiya (@ayaxxamiaya), themselves resemble computer-generated Instagram avatars.

The accounts they follow include ones created by make-up artist Pat McGrath (@patmcgrathreal) and also Tim Burton's, although it was beyond the powers of a Gucci interpreter to explain in English which of the many accounts dedicated to the director the sisters meant.

Was it @timburtonofficial or @timburton_film or @timburton_fanpage or @timburton_art or even @#timburton_tattoos, which features more than 1,000 images of people permanently inked with images from The Nightmare Before Christmas (1993), Beetlejuice (1988) and Edward Scissorhands (1990)? NYTIMES

Love in 200 words

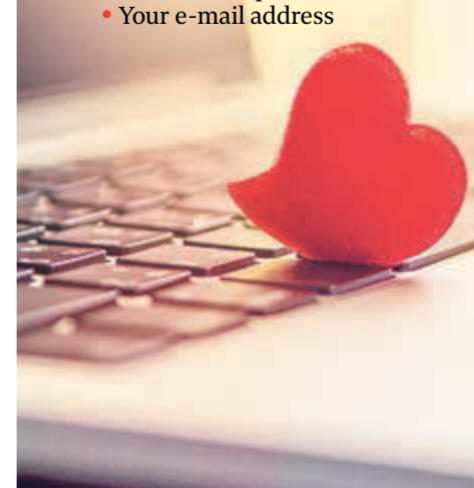
This Valentine's Day, The Straits Times invites you to tell us a love story in miniature

Send us a story about love – true, imagined, funny, sad, yours, anybody's – in 200 words, 200 being the magic number this Bicentennial year. We will publish the best entries on Feb 10.

- All entries must be 200 words or fewer.
- The Straits Times reserves the right to curate, edit and publish the entries at its discretion.
- Entries should not contain profanity or graphic language.

Send your entry to stlife@sph.com.sg by Jan 31 with "LOVE STORY" in the e-mail subject line, along with the following details:

- Your full name as in your NRIC
- Your date of birth
- Your mobile phone number
- Your e-mail address





Mahershala Ali plays a police officer investigating the disappearance of two children in True Detective.
PHOTO: HBO

Subtle way to deal with racism

Actor Mahershala Ali, who stars in the third season of True Detective, prefers racial prejudices to be seen as undercurrents in the show

Alison de Souza
In Los Angeles

The new season of crime anthology series *True Detective* is headlined by Oscar winner Mahershala Ali, who plays a police officer investigating the disappearance of two children in 1980s Arkansas - a case that takes surprising turns.

But his character, police detective Wayne Hays, was originally written as white, and Ali was offered only a supporting role - that is, until the 44-year-old convinced series creator Nic Pizzolatto to change the script and make Wayne black.

Speaking to *The Straits Times* and other press in Beverly Hills last month, Ali - who took home a Golden Globe for the film *Green Book* earlier this month - says he knew the story would be enriched if it could explore the racism of that era.

"I felt like that could be more interesting - to see a lead detective in 1980 navigating the South, trying to solve this crime (while) up against a homogeneous community," says the star, who won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for the drama *Moonlight* (2016).

"He already stands out as just a layperson and now he's a police officer in this community in 1980, and that is going to make it more difficult to solve this crime?" he says of Wayne, whose partner, Roland West (Stephen Dorff), is white.

The series, which debuted this week, airs on Mondays at 10am and 10pm on HBO Go, HBO (StarHub TV Channel 601) and HBO On Demand (StarHub TV Channel 602).

To further convince Pizzolatto - who created the acclaimed first season of *True Detective* in 2014 starring Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson - Ali showed him photographs of his own grandfather, a state police officer in the 1960s and 1970s, and drew on the man for inspiration in creating the character of Wayne.

"He had five daughters and he lived in a house with six women, but he's, like, a man's man - really quiet and a little strict."

"I love my grandfather, but he just didn't feel like an emotionally available person, which are things that Wayne deals with. And people like that tend to soften as they get older, so I was tracking how he softens."

Wayne also deals with the racial prejudices of the time, but Ali strongly felt that these should be

undercurrents in the story rather than addressed head on.

"I didn't feel like there needed to be n-words flying around or what have you. I felt like it could be easily addressed through subtle things, like a character being directed to not look at me but at Roland - even if I just asked him the question and him viewing Roland naturally as the authority figure," says the actor, who is married to artist Amatus Sari-Karim and has a two-year-old daughter.

This is a different tack from the one taken by many other major Hollywood films and series with black central characters that deal with racism more overtly.

That includes two favourites for this year's Oscar race: Ali's own movie *Green Book*, which opens in Singapore next month and deals with racial discrimination against blacks in 1960s America, and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a romantic drama from his *Moonlight* director Barry Jenkins.

Ali says he loves the latter film, but does not necessarily like how it incorporates the element of race into the drama.

In contrast, *Season 3 of True Detective* "doesn't shy away from race, but it's not necessarily trying

to have a conversation with you about race - it just embraces it and makes sure it's part of the environment".

"It's not ignored and it's absolutely dealt with, but we don't lead with that and it's not something that drives the story or slows the story down at all."

He hopes more films and shows will be told in a way that incorporates the everyday experiences of non-whites as a matter of course.

"There is real value in us moving to a place where there are moments you just see, in this case, black people - but in general people of colour - experience their love stories."

"That just have people in love and trying to stay married or working up to a divorce - and not really dealing with anything else other than the issues surrounding that relationship."

At the same time, all kinds of stories about diverse groups are important no matter how they deal with broader social issues.

"All of these offerings make their contribution and they have their place, because they are real points of contact for us to have a conversation," he says.

stlife@sph.com.sg

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TAMIL MURASU
VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY

India

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The year superheroes triumphed in Hollywood

NEW YORK • On Sunday, *Spider-Man: Into The Spider-Verse* was named best animated feature at the Critics' Choice Awards while best-picture nominee *Black Panther* won for production design, costume design and visual effects.

The results helped build momentum for both Oscar hopefuls starring costumed heroes.

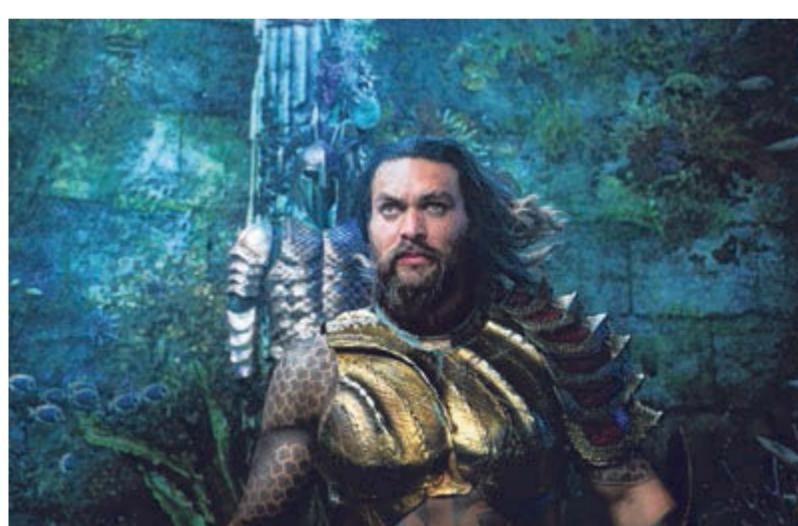
On the same weekend, *Aquaman* crossed the US\$1-billion (\$1.4-billion) mark worldwide a month after release - becoming the first film in DC Comics' expanded universe, and the fourth superhero movie from last year, to hit that milestone.

Even with Oscar nominations still to come on Jan 22, the verdict seems clear. Critically and commercially, 2018 is the greatest year in superhero cinema.

The art form continues to gain wider respect - winning over those who dimly viewed its roots as books ostensibly written for kids, and converting those who have discovered how its artful aesthetics and narratives can entertain and inspire.

To be sure, Hollywood has wrestled in recent years with its growing reliance on superheroes, with some detractors complaining of superhero movie fatigue on screens.

Giving so much space over to comic-book heroes, as well as to dinosaur and disaster movies, has meant fewer slots for smaller films. Yet, over the past decade, super-



Aquaman, which has made more than \$1.4 billion worldwide, is one of the movies that helped to make 2018 the greatest year in superhero cinema.

PHOTO: WARNER BROS

hero movies have proved to be the most reliably bankable.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe, for instance, has grossed US\$17.5 billion since its 2008 launch, with franchises such as Thor and Captain America.

The DC Extended Universe has grossed US\$4.8 billion since its 2013 kick-off with *Man Of Steel*.

Still, last year's degree of superhero dominance is unprecedented.

In the United States, five of the top six films were superhero types, led by three Disney-distributed releases: Marvel's *Black Panther*,

Infinity War (US\$678.8 million) and Pixar's *Incredibles 2* (US\$608.6 million).

Globally, the appetite for superheroes is so strong - a feasting fostered by years of ever-expanding franchises - that even less-acclaimed releases can find a huge audience.

Aquaman, for instance, scores only a 55 average score on Metacritic.com. And *Venom*'s appeal positively defies its critical drubbing.

Four of last year's biggest live-action superhero films - *Black Panther*, *Infinity War*, *Spider-Man*

and *Aquaman* - prominently featured characters of colour, giving diverse audiences more ways to identify with the actors on screen.

But critical acclaim has been harder to come by than blockbuster popularity.

Respect was first sparked by Richard Donner's *Superman* in the 1970s and heightened by Tim Burton's *Batman* in 1989, which featured strong performances and high technical craft for their eras.

Things evolved even further in 2008 when Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe-launching *Iron Man* from Jon Favreau became game-changers in terms of how such movies were widely perceived.

The two movies were nominated for a combined 10 Oscars, with *Dark Knight* winning two.

Still, these awards were mostly given for technical achievements.

Only seven superhero movies have won an Oscar, and only one of those - 2008's *The Dark Knight* - received a trophy in one of the "big six" categories (Heath Ledger's posthumous supporting-actor Oscar).

Now, if superhero movies can receive their first-ever best picture Oscar nomination - say, for *Black Panther* - then 2018 should go down as the best year ever for capes-and-cowls cinema.

WASHINGTON POST

Comics

BABY BLUES



GARFIELD



Free to air

CHANNEL 5

AM

6.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 15 (HD)

(PG) (V)

6.45 Just For Laughs Gags 17 (HD) (V)

7.00 First Look Asia (Simulcast From CNA)

(CA)

9.00 The Dr Oz Show 10 (IE)

10.00 The \$100,000 Pyramid (HD) (PG) (V)

10.30 Everyday Gourmet 3 (HD) (IE)

11.00 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)

11.45 Just For Laughs Gags 17 (V)

PM

12.00 Martha Bakes 6 (IE)

12.30 Secret Meat Business (IE)

1.00 Wheel Of Fortune 36 (CC) (V)

1.30 Kin (PG) (CC) (D)

2.00 Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd 4 (SC)

2.30 Arts 21 (Cul)

3.00 The Dr Oz Show 10 (IE)

4.00 Meet The MP (HD) (PG) (SC)

4.30 America's Got Talent 12 (HD) (PG) (V)

5.30 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)

6.30 Divided (US) (HD) (PG) (V)

7.00 Wheel Of Fortune 36 (CC) (V)

7.30 America's Got Talent: The Champions (V)

8.30 Kin (PG) (CC) (D)

9.00 News 5

9.30 The Wish (CC) (IE)

10.00 Energy Within (PG13) (CC) (IE)

11.00 Scorpion 2 (HD) (PG) (D)

AM

12.00 Kin (PG) (CC) (D)

12.30 Whacked Out Sports (PG) (V)

12.50 The Ellen DeGeneres Show 16 (PG) (V)

1.40 This Is Us (HD) (PG13) (D)

2.30 Grimm 5 (HD) (PG13) (D)

3.20 Everyday Gourmet 3 (HD) (IE)

3.50 Martha Bakes 6 (IE)

4.15 Secret Meat Business (IE)

4.40 The \$100,000 Pyramid (HD) (PG) (V)

5.10 The Dr Oz Show 10 (IE)

CHANNEL 8

AM

6.00 Classic Golden Melody 2018 (V)

7.00 Frontline (CC) (CA)

7.30 Hello Singapore Highlights (CA)

8.00 Heart To Heart (PG) (CC) (D)

9.00 Morning Express (CA)

9.30 Jalan Jalan (PG) (CC) (D)

10.00 Stay Healthy Stay Happy 2017 (IE)

10.30 Night Market Life Aka Life (PG) (D)

PM

12.30 Street Smart (V)

1.00 News 8 At One

1.30 118 (PG) (CC) (D)

2.00 New Doraemon (S)

2.30 Your Hand In Mine (HD) (CC) (D)

3.30 The Golden Path (CC) (D)

4.30 Taste Of Life (PG) (D)

5.30 118 Reunion (PG) (CC) (D)

6.30 Hello Singapore (CA)

7.30 Jalan Jalan (PG) (CC) (D)

8.00 A Sweet Taste Of Art (CC) (IE) (Debut)

9.00 Heart To Heart (PG) (CC) (D)

10.00 News Tonight

10.30 Fruit, Veggies & Me 2 (CC) (IE)

11.00 Princess Agents (PG) (D)

AM

12.00 The Princess Weiyoung (PG) (D)

1.00 Celebrity Chef 2 (V)

2.00 A Time To Dance (D)

4.00 A Place Called Home (PG) (D)

CHANNEL U

PM

3.00 Scrum! (PG) (CC) (D)

4.00 Greener Pastures (CC) (IE)

5.00 Cheongdamdong Scandal (PG) (CC) (D)

6.00 The Menu (PG) (CC) (D)

7.00 You Are The Only One (PG) (CC) (D)

9.00 Schools Unlimited (CC) (IE)

10.00 Brother's Keeper 2 (PG13) (CC) (D)

11.00 News Tonight

11.30 Schools Unlimited (CC) (IE)

AM

12.30 You Are The Only One (PG) (CC) (D)

2.30 Close

CNA

AM

6.00 Singapore Tonight

7.00 First Look Asia

9.00 Asia Business First

10.02 Why It Matters 2

11.00 News Now

PM

1.02 Real Deal

2.00 News Now

4.02 Why It Matters 2

5.00 News Now

7.02 Collaborate To Innovate

8.00 Primetime Asia

9.02 Champions For Change (CC)

10.00 Singapore Tonight

AM

11.02 Real Deal

PM

12.00 News Now

12.30 Power List Asia 6

1.02 Champions For Change

2.00 News Now

2.30 The Successors 5

3.02 Why It Matters 2

4.00 News Now

4.30 Millionaire Minds

5.02 Champions For Change

Programmes may be pre-empted by breaking news

VASANTHAM

PM

3.00 Super Samayal 4 (IE)

3.30 Azhagiya Snehithi 2 (IE)

4.00 Sundaram Kudumbathinar (HD) (D)

4.30 Enna Nadakuthu 6 (HD) (V)

5.30 Motu Patlu 3 (S)

6.00 Ishq Ka Rang Safed (Hindi) (D)

7.00 Konjam Sor Konjam 2 (Cul)

7.30 Mella Thiranthathu Kathavu 3 (PG) (CC) (D)

8.00 Uyire (PG) (D)

8.30 Tamil Seithi (News)

9.00 Ethiroli 15 (HD) (CC) (CA)

9.30 Therupugal 4 (CC) (IE)

10.00 Rowthiram (PG13) (D)

10.30 Bayam (PG) (CC) (D)

11.00 Nyagam Varutharach 3 (V)

11.30 Tamil Seithi (News) (R)

AM

12.00 Close

OKTO

AM

9.00 Twirlywoos (P)

9.30 Teddies (P)

10.00 Dokis (P)

10.30 Sesame Street (HD) (P)

11.00 Dora The Explorer (HD) (P)

11.30 Andy's Prehistoric Adventures (P)

PM

12.00 Bugsville (P)

12.30 Teddies (P)

1.00 Coconut The Little Dragon (P)

1.30 Twirlywoos (P)

2.00 Dokis (HD) (P)

2.30 Sesame Street (HD) (P)

3.00 Dora The Explorer (HD) (P)

3.30 Andy's Prehistoric Adventures (P)

4.00 All Over The Workplace (S)

4.30 Captain Flinn And The Pirate

Dinosaurs (S)

5.00 Littlest Pet Shop (S)

5.30 Grizzy & The Lemmings (C)

5.55 The Lion Guard (P)

6.25 Backward Race (S)

6.30 Totally Totto (HD) (S)

7.00 My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic (CC) (S)

7.30 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (HD) (CC) (C)

8.00 Star Wars Rebels (HD) (CC) (S)

8.30 Inazuma Eleven (HD) (CC) (S)

9.00 BWF Grand Prix - Scottish Open 2018 (Sports)

11.50 American Ninja Warrior 6 (HD) (PG)

(Sports)

AM

12.40 Close

SURIA

PM

3.00 Juxbox Ekspres

4.00 Seindah Takdir Cinta (PG) (D)

5.00 Rintihan Hati (PG) (CC) (D)

6.00 Ejen Ali (S)

6.30 Top 5 Makam (CC) (IE)

7.00 Teratai Kemboja (PG) (CC) (D)

8.00 Berita (News)

8.30 Detik (PG) (CA)

9.00 Manja 3 (CC) (IE) (Finale)

9.30 Hilang Kasih Di Sarajevo (PG) (CC) (D

Pratt engaged to Schwarzenegger

NEW YORK • Last week, actor Chris Pratt helped Katherine Schwarzenegger move house.

Now, the author is set to have a permanent place in his heart after they got engaged following a whirlwind romance.

"Sweet Katherine, so happy you said yes!" Pratt, 39, wrote on Instagram late on Sunday.

"I'm thrilled to be marrying you. Proud to go boldly in faith with you. Here we go!"

The message accompanied a photo of the duo embracing, a large engagement ring on her finger.

Media reports said the ring could cost US\$150,000 (\$S202,800) to US\$175,000.

Schwarzenegger later posted the same photo on her account, adding a message to her new fiance: "My sweet love. Wouldn't want to live this life with anyone but you."

Photos first turned up in tabloids last summer of Jurassic World (2015) star Pratt and Schwarzenegger, 29, who is the daughter of former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and journalist Maria Shriver.

A sweet courtship was chronicled on social media and through paparazzi pictures: church dates, ice cream runs and meet-the-family dinners. A source told People magazine: "Chris doesn't just date to date, and neither does Katherine. She's very excited."

It will be the first marriage for the author and the second for Pratt, who split from actress Anna Faris in 2017 after a nine-year marriage.

The former couple have a six-year-old son.

"I'm so happy for you both," Faris, 42, said on Pratt's Instagram post. "Congratulations."



Actor Chris Pratt popped the question to author Katherine Schwarzenegger, the daughter of former California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, after a whirlwind romance.
PHOTO: INSTAGRAM/CHRIS PRATT

Please return stolen script, Hugh Grant pleads

LONDON • Can the thief, or thieves, grant Hugh Grant's request?

The British actor took to social media on Monday to appeal for the return of a script he lost when his car was broken into.

The Paddington 2 (2017) star said on Twitter that his bag had been stolen from his vehicle on Sunday

night and that his children's medical notes might also be missing.

"In the unlikely chance that anyone knows who broke into my car tonight and stole my bag, please try and persuade them to at least return my script," Grant, 58, posted to his 335,000 followers.

"Many weeks' worth of notes and

ideas," he added, without identifying the document further, asking for the items to be returned to Coach Films in West London.

Grant, who shot to fame in 1994 as the lead in Four Weddings And A Funeral, was most recently seen on television in mini-series A Very English Scandal. REUTERS

On social media

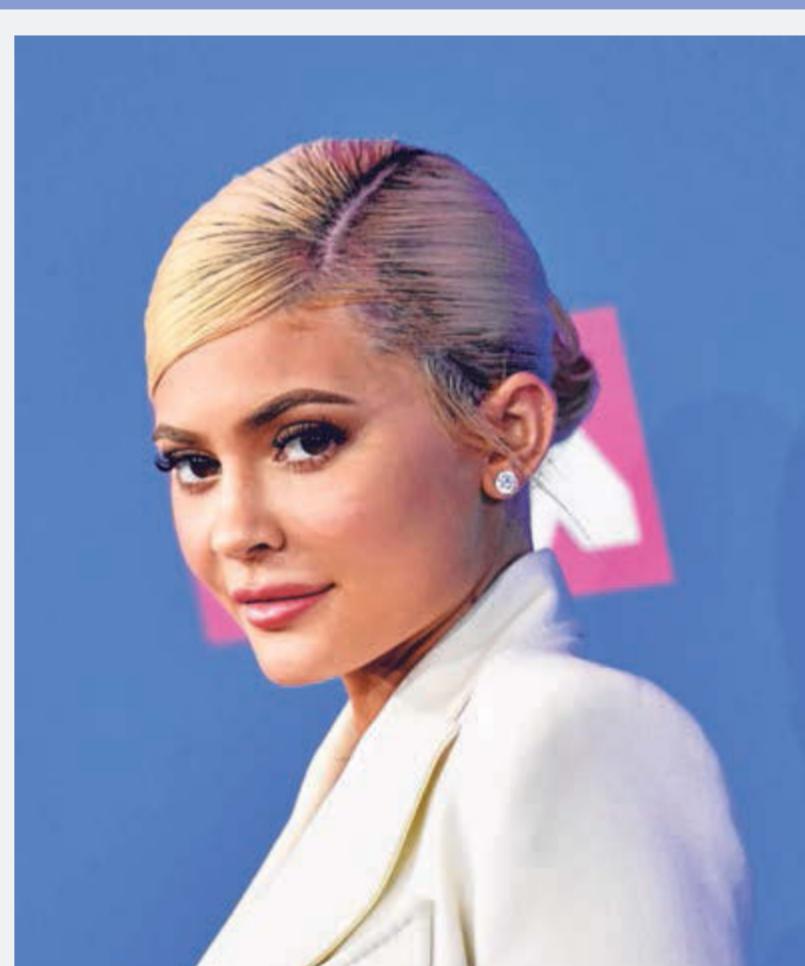
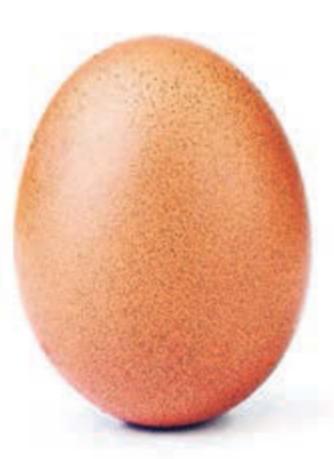
KYLIE JENNER BEATEN BY AN EGG: An Instagram record held by social media star and make-up mogul Kylie Jenner has cracked, with a photo of an ordinary brown egg hatching a new mark for most-liked image. Jenner's birth announcement of daughter Stormi Webster on Feb 6 last year was the most popular post on the photo-sharing platform, with 18.3 million likes, but the egg, posted only 10 days ago, has already amassed more than 38 million likes.

"Let's set a world record together and get the most liked post on Instagram. Beating the current world record held by Kylie Jenner (18 million)! We got this," urged the account, named "world-record-egg".

Jenner, 21 – the youngest of the Kardashian-Jenner clan that includes reality television star Kim Kardashian and former Olympian Caitlyn Jenner – was magnanimous in her response, posting a video of her frying an egg on hot concrete. "Take that little egg," read the caption posted by the entrepreneur and socialite, whose net worth was estimated by Forbes magazine at US\$900 million (\$S1.2 billion), due in large part to her Kylie Cosmetics brand.

The identities of the individuals behind the new record remains a mystery, although they told Agence France-Presse they live in London.

"I thought it would be an interesting experiment to try and beat the record with something as basic as possible," they said. "I guess it's also a comment on celebrity culture and how fragile and easily cracked it is (pun intended)." PHOTOS: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE, INSTAGRAM/WORLD_RECORD_EGG



Lady Gaga leaves awards to be with dying horse

NEW YORK • Lady Gaga was not in a mood to celebrate after she shared the Best Actress accolade with Glenn Close in the Critics' Choice Awards on Sunday.

Instead of going to a party, the A Star Is Born (2018) star posted that she had to rush to see her dying horse.

"It saddens me to say that after the show, I learnt that my dear angel of a horse, Arabella, is dying. I am rushing to her now to say goodbye."

"She is and was a beautiful horse. Our souls and spirits were one. When she was in pain, so was I. I will never forget the moments we shared."

Arabella, a name that Gaga said means "yield and prayer", was given to her by the Interscope music label in 2015, reported Billboard.

"She will forever be a part of me," Lady Gaga wrote. "I am so very sad. But I wish for your pain to end and the gates of heaven to open for you."



Singer-actress Lady Gaga rushed to see her dying horse, Arabella, after bagging Best Actress at the Critics' Choice Awards on Sunday. PHOTO: INSTAGRAM/LADY GAGA

Give Seungri back-up dancers, say fans

SEOUL • Fans are upset that BigBang singer Seungri has not been provided with "firepower" in his current solo tour of Asia.

Reports have surfaced that even Mr Yang Hyun-suk, chief executive of the boyband's entertainment agency YG Entertainment, does not know Seungri is on tour.

According to the Korea Portal website, Seungri told his audience in Hong Kong that his boss had called him before he went on stage.

Mr Yang apparently asked him what he was up to and the singer had to update him that he was on tour. Seungri took the opportunity to ask Mr Yang for more back-up dancers, but Mr Yang ignored his request, telling him that his star power was surely enough to hold the attention of fans.

Other fans have lashed out at YG for doing very little to promote Seungri's shows.

The singer, whose bandmates T.O.P, G-Dragon, Daesung and Taeyang are serving their mandatory military service, is expected to enlist this year.

Seungri is slated to perform in Singapore on Feb 23.

Meet Captain Marvel in Singapore

Will Captain Marvel really be the one to save the day? Set up a Valentine's date with her and ask her yourself, as Brie Larson, who plays the titular role in the highly anticipated superhero film Captain Marvel, will be flying into Singapore on Feb 14 to promote it.

She will be joined by co-stars Samuel L. Jackson (who plays Nick Fury) and Gemma Chan (Minn-Erva), as well as the film's directors, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, at a free event at Marina Bay Sands.

As space is limited, fans must register in person for tickets. Registration begins on Feb 10 at 10am at Sands Expo and Convention Centre and tickets will be given out on a first-come, first-served basis.

For more information, go to www.marinabay sands.com/captainmarvel

In Short

Missy Elliot first rapper in Songwriters Hall of Fame

Missy Elliott will be inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in June, making her the first female hip-hop artist to be lauded.

Other honourees include Yusuf Islam (better known as Cat Stevens), John Prine and Jack Tempchin.

R. Kelly 'threatened' his accuser

A woman who sued R. Kelly, accusing the R&B star of knowingly infecting her with a sexually transmitted disease and false imprisonment, said he had threatened her.

A lawyer for Ms Faith Rodgers, 20, said she faced "efforts to intimidate and retaliate" from Kelly after she filed a lawsuit now pending in New York's Supreme Court.

B HOME

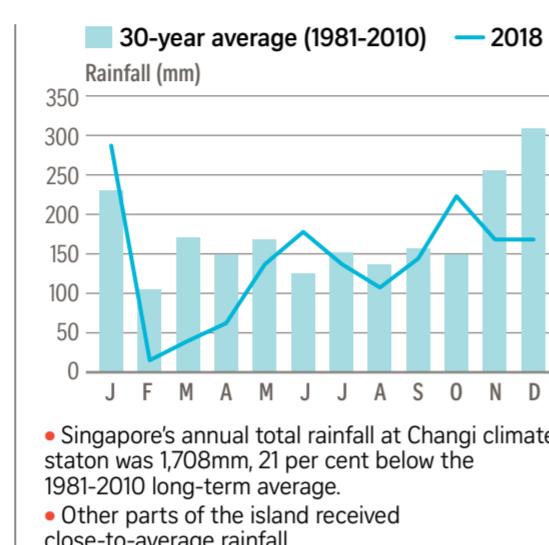
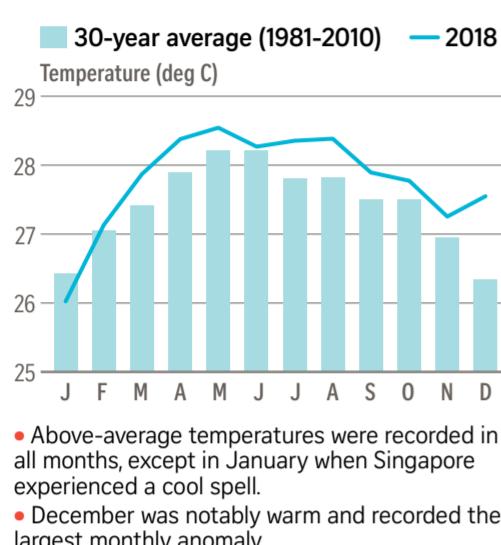
12
HEIGHT IN METRES OF THE TALLEST PIG LANTERN IN CHINATOWN

B2

2018: A hot and dry year

The year saw a continuation of above-average temperature over Singapore at 27.9 deg C, 0.4 deg C higher than the 1981-2010 long-term average. Additionally, 2009-2018 is Singapore's warmest decade on record.

IN A NUTSHELL



NOTABLE WEATHER EVENTS AND EXTREMES

Hot, hot, hot

- Second warmest December since 1929.
- Dec 28 and Dec 30's maximum temperatures of 33.8 deg C ties the previous record for a December day set in 1948.

A remarkable cool spell

- A monsoon surge from Jan 10 to Jan 14 brought consecutive days of cool weather across Singapore.
- Daily minimum temperatures reached a low of 21.2 deg C.

Blustery winds

- Strongest recorded since 2010.
- Farms in Lim Chu Kang suffered notable damage from gusts brought about by an intense thunderstorm.

Strongest wind gust
March 30
133.3kmh

Coldest night
March 30
20.5 deg C

Tengah

Jurong West

Coolest month
January
25.7 deg C

Ulu Pandan

Wettest month
June
648.2mm

Wettest day
June 26
179.8mm

Hottest day
March 6
35.6 deg C

Admiralty

Warmest month
May
29.5 deg C

Pulau Ubin

Hottest day
Oct 5
35.6 deg C

Marina Barrage

Wettest month
June
648.2mm

Wettest day
June 26
179.8mm

Source: METEOROLOGICAL SERVICE SINGAPORE STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Mercury rising: Global warming sends stark signals

Singapore experienced eighth warmest year on record last year while December was second warmest ever

Cheryl Teh

Found yourself turning on the air-con more than usual last month? Thanks to global warming, last De-

cember was the second warmest ever in Singapore, with the monthly mean temperature of 27.6 deg C just 0.1 deg C lower than in December 2015 – the hottest December on record.

ember was the second warmest ever in Singapore, with the monthly mean temperature of 27.6 deg C just 0.1 deg C lower than in December 2015 – the hottest December on record.

Consistently above average temperatures, punctuated by a brief cool spell, made last year the eighth warmest year on record here.

The mean annual temperature was 27.9 deg C, or 0.2 deg C warmer than the 27.7 deg C in 2017, the Meteorological Services Singapore (MSS) said yesterday in its review of 2018 weather and climate. The warmest year on record for Singa-

pore is 2016, when the annual mean temperature was 28.4 deg C.

Deputy principal research scientist Raizan Rahmat at the Centre for Climate Research Singapore, which is part of MSS, said last year's higher temperatures were part of an ongoing upturn that can be attributed to global warming.

FLUCTUATIONS continued on B2

UP AND UP

Temperatures are expected to continue rising above the natural range of climate variability due to the increasing influence of ongoing and future global warming and, to some extent, urbanisation.

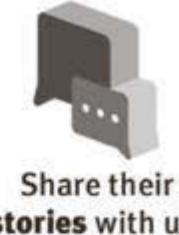
MR RAIZAN RAHMAT, deputy principal research scientist at the Centre for Climate Research Singapore.



Know a neighbour with a big heart?



Or one who is always willing to extend a helping hand?



Share their stories with us!

If you've been touched by a neighbour's actions, now is the time to show your appreciation. Share their stories with us and they could be the next recipients of the Good Neighbour Award 2019.

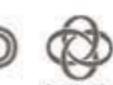
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NUSS Professorship Lecture with Professor George Dimopoulos

CURING MOSQUITO VECTORS OF HUMAN DISEASES

Aedes and Anopheles mosquito vectors pose a tremendous public health burden due to the threat of arbovirus and malaria parasite transmission. Find out how genetic and ecologically sound disease control strategies can be developed through understanding the species' innate immune system and vector competence.

24 January 2019, Thursday
7pm to 9pm (Registration starts at 6.30pm)

NUSS Kent Ridge Guild House
9 Kent Ridge Drive Singapore 119241

Free Admission*
Dress Code: Smart Casual

- No-show fee of \$10.70 and \$21.40 (inclusive of GST) applies to members and guests respectively.
- Light refreshments will be provided.



About the speaker

Professor George Dimopoulos is currently an Associate Professor at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University. His research focuses on the innate immune system and microbiomes of mosquito vectors that transmit human pathogens with the long-term goal of developing novel intervention strategies.

ABOUT NUSS PROFESSORSHIP

NUSS established the NUSS Professorship with an endowment of \$1.5 million to fund eminent professors from different disciplines to share their knowledge with the NUS community and general public. This Professorship is part of NUSS' efforts to contribute to the development of meaningful interactions with its alma mater through academic pursuits.

nuss
The Graduate Club

For registration and enquiries, please contact **Jocelyn Tan** at **6586 3744** or email jocelyntan@nuss.org.sg.

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Pigs ham it up for some festive fun in Chinatown

Annual Chinese New Year event will also feature street bazaar and traditional Cantonese opera performances

Chery Teh

The pig-themed lanterns in Chinatown will be lit on Jan 20 as planned, despite criticisms from some quarters, and will usher in the Year of the Pig.

The lanterns are in the shape of a family of eight pigs – the tallest of which is 12m high.

The centrepiece of this year's Chinese New Year lantern display, the pigs are perched on top of a lantern depicting a bulging purse overflowing with gold coins.

They are among 2,688 lanterns that will line the streets of Chinatown until March 6. The display includes a sea of overhanging red and yellow lanterns that forms the word "chun", which is Chinese for spring. This is flanked by three golden koi fish. There will also be 180 handcrafted pig lanterns dot-

ting the main streets of Chinatown.

The full display will run 600m along New Bridge Road and Eu Tong Sen Street, and 255m along South Bridge Road. This is the biggest lantern display in the history of Chinatown's Chinese New Year light-ups.

Some people had pointed out that the massive pig lanterns look more "dirty" than festive. Since the lanterns were seen in their entirety last week, some netizens have also called the family of pigs "slightly blearily-eyed" and "scary".

MP Lily Neo said that while organisers of the Chinese New Year festival in Chinatown have welcomed the feedback, the pigs' appearance is unavoidable, as the large-scale lanterns are made from wires, which can be seen in the daylight.

Speaking yesterday at a preview of the light-up, Dr Neo, MP for Jalan Besar GRC and adviser to Kreta

Ayer-Kim Seng grassroots organisations, said the structures will look better lit at night.

"The lanterns have to last for a month, so we use wires, so they will stand up, and a hardy silk covering so the pigs will look natural and life-like," she explained.

Dr Neo added that students from the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), who designed the lanterns, did their best to make the display attractive.

This is the eighth year that SUTD has been involved in the light-up.

"We volunteered ourselves for this extracurricular project, so we could have our designs come to life. But we will learn from this and make the next lanterns more welcoming, especially after we received feedback that the lanterns for last year's dog-themed celebrations looked too fierce," said Mr Ho Zhi Yuan, 23, a third-year student at SUTD and supervisor of the lantern-design team, which included 11 students who worked alongside 42 professional craftsmen. Other festive events taking

place during the Chinese New Year period include a street bazaar (along Pagoda Street, Smith Street, Temple Street and Trengganu Street) from Jan 18 to Feb 4.

There will also be traditional Cantonese opera performances at the newly-revamped Kreta Ayer People's Theatre, and a Chinese New Year countdown party on Feb 4, from 9.30pm to 12.30am, that will include firecrackers and a fireworks display.

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Drastic fluctuations in weather conditions

FROM B1

"Temperatures are expected to continue rising above the natural range of climate variability due to the increasing influence of on-going and future global warming, and to some extent urbanisation," Mr Raizan said.

The second half of last month was particularly warm, MSS said.

On Dec 28 and 30, the Changi climate station recorded a daily maximum temperature of 33.8 deg C, tying the record set on Dec 2, 1948, for a December day since Singapore started keeping records in 1929.

MSS highlighted that Singapore's 10 warmest years were recorded in the past 25 years, and that eight of these 10 had occurred since 2001.

The period between 2009 and 2018 was also the warmest decade for Singapore, with a mean temperature of 27.89 deg C. This eclipsed the previous record by 0.02 deg C in the 1997-2006 period.

These are signs of the long-term, continuous effect of global warming, said Mr Raizan, adding: "How much hotter Singapore will be in future decades will largely depend on the rate of global warming."

Although MSS noted that Singa-

pore's overall temperatures are on the rise, the weather has also been fairly temperamental.

Last year, a monsoon surge from Jan 10 to 14 brought five consecutive days of cool weather, with the daily minimum temperature dipping to 21.2 deg C on Jan 14 – the longest cool spell in at least two decades.

MSS also said this was rare and a form of extreme weather but not unprecedented. In December 1991, a cool spell of similar duration sent the daily minimum temperature dipping below 23 deg C.

Though 2018 was largely a neutral year for El Nino, which is associated with hot and dry conditions, with "no significant influence on Singapore's climate", weak La Nina conditions prevailed in the first quarter.

Still, Singapore was not spared drastic fluctuations in weather conditions – with torrential rain, hail storms and strong winds experienced in the first half of 2018.

Last Jan 30, intense thunderstorms brought rain and even hailstones over parts of northern Singapore. A day later, strong wind gusts

27.9

The 2018 mean annual temperature in deg C, which was 0.2 deg C warmer than the 27.7 deg C in 2017.

from a waterspout off Singapore's east coast sent small boats and other objects flying.

At other periods, heavy rains and strong wind gusts from intense thunderstorms triggered flash floods, toppled trees and caused damage to property.

On March 30, strong winds from an intense thunderstorm uprooted trees and caused substantial damage to farms in the Lim Chu Kang area. And a wind gust measuring 133.3kmh recorded at nearby Tengah that day was the strongest in eight years.

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Register online for MOE kindergartens; change in admissions criteria

Jolene Ang

Parents who wish to enrol their children in a Ministry of Education (MOE) kindergarten in 2020 can do so online, and need not submit registration forms and supporting documents in person.

There will also be changes to the admissions framework for these kindergartens, which were first set up in 2014 to provide affordable pre-school education and raise the quality of early childhood education.

Top priority for admissions will now go to Singaporean children from lower-income households living within 1km of the MOE kindergarten.

Children with siblings in K1 to Primary 6 in the MOE kindergarten or primary school the kindergarten is co-located in will have second priority.

Previously, top priority was

given to children with siblings in the MOE kindergarten in K1, while second priority went to children from lower-income households.

A third of the spaces are allocated to Singaporean children from lower-income households living within 1km of the MOE kindergarten.

The 2019 MOE kindergarten registration exercise, for K1 admission in January next year, will start from 9am on Feb 8 and end at 4pm on Feb 11.

Parents will be informed of the outcome by April 10.

There are 23 MOE kindergartens. Six more will open next year, which means a total of 29 MOE kindergartens will be participating in the registration exercise this year.

The ministry plans to run a total of 50 such centres by 2023.

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Zuji fails to renew agent licences in S'pore, HK

Websites show error messages; Novena Square office shuttered

Tiffany Fumiko Tay

Online travel booking site Zuji appears to have ceased business, after failing to renew its travel agent licences in both Singapore and Hong Kong.

The Singapore Tourism Board told The Straits Times that Zuji's licence lapsed on Dec 31 last year, and it can no longer provide travel products and services here.

The South China Morning Post reported last week that the Hong Kong-based operator had let its travel agent licence expire and owed customers there thousands of dollars in refunds. Zuji said in a Facebook post the same day that it was experiencing "technical difficulties" with processing refunds.

Signs surfaced a few months ago that there were issues at Zuji, founded in 2002 as one of the earliest online travel agents in Asia.

In November, it was suspended from issuing airline tickets through the International Air Transport Association's (Iata) centralised air ticket billing service as it had failed to pay for tickets it had sold to customers.

It cut staff numbers in its Singapore office and said its booking site would be "temporarily closed" to prepare for launching a new platform in the first quarter of this year.

That appears to be off, with Zuji's Singapore and Hong Kong booking sites replacing their "new site coming soon" with error messages.

Iata Asia-Pacific spokesman Albert Tjoeng said that while the amount Zuji owed had been recovered, the firm's participation in the billing service was terminated earlier this month as it had not met the conditions to be reinstated.

Zuji did not respond to requests for comment. Its office at Novena Square, which was largely empty when The Straits Times visited in November, remained shut with the lights off yesterday.



The only trace of Zuji's presence when The Straits Times visited its office yesterday was a note to its customers posted on the door. The Singapore Tourism Board said Zuji's licence lapsed on Dec 31 last year, and it can no longer provide travel products and services here. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

Zuji was acquired in 2016 by Uriel Aviation Holding, a Hong Kong-based travel firm that reportedly has ties to the debt-laden Chinese conglomerate, HNA Group.

The Consumers Association of Singapore said it received 33 complaints against Zuji in the past year

relating to delays in refunds, among other issues.

Ms Joey Loh, who paid Zuji more than \$1,000 for a round-trip flight from Singapore to Osaka on Vietnam Airlines, cancelled her booking two months before she was due to travel in December and received

an e-mail promising a refund within 12 to 16 weeks. She is still waiting.

The 46-year-old, who is self-employed, said: "I still have a little bit of hope, but I think it's going to be difficult to get my money back."

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Ofo's licence to be suspended if it does not comply with requirements

Goh Yan Han

Chinese bicycle-sharing operator ofo has breached multiple regulatory requirements and, yesterday, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) gave it a Feb 13 deadline to comply with them.

If it fails to meet all the requirements, LTA intends to suspend its licence, the authority said in a statement.

It has been given ample time to comply with the requirements, it added.

LTA recounted in its statement ofo's breaches. They include not reducing its deployed bicycle fleet to the stated maximum of 10,000, despite multiple warnings and regulatory action taken against it.

The company had also failed to implement a QR-code parking sys-

tem by Monday. The system ensures users park at designated areas.

"We view these as serious breaches of critical requirements," LTA said.

Its spokesman, when contacted, told The Straits Times it has not received any request from ofo to surrender its licence.

The spokesman also said the authority is in contact with ofo about its non-compliance with regulations and reports of the closure of its overseas business units.

Singapore required bike-sharing operators to get a licence last year and they could apply for one since last May.

LTA said it has been helping licensees comply with its requirements after the first batch of licences was awarded in October.

In November, LTA said it would take action against ofo for breaching the fleet-size quota, an infringement that carries a fine of up to \$100,000.

Last month, ST reported ofo users as complaining that their refund requests had gone unanswered.

When ST visited ofo's registered address then, staff of neighbouring companies said they had not seen anyone from ofo for several weeks.

Yesterday, it did not respond to ST's e-mail.

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15

Average number of applications to adopt a non-biological child made each year by singles who had never been married, between 2013 and 2017

2

Number of Bills introduced

13,000

Number of Build-To-Order flats booked by second-time buyers from Jan 2015 to Dec 2018



18,572

Number of singles invited to select a two-room flexi flat from Nov 2015 to Dec 2018

148,000

Number of low-income seniors who receive Silver Support payouts, of which 65 per cent are women



60%

Proportion of Supplementary Retirement Scheme account holders who contribute to their accounts in a given year.

PHOTOS: HDB, ST FILE / STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Food importers may be required to help tackle supply disruptions

Move among steps to beef up food security; new agency to boost safety for consumers

Tiffany Fumiko Tay

Importers of key food items may be required to come up with preventive strategies and other plans to mitigate the impact of supply disruptions to Singapore, which imports more than 90 per cent of its food and is vulnerable to factors affecting global supply, such as disease outbreaks and climate change. This and other measures to beef

up Singapore's food security were included in two Bills tabled in Parliament yesterday to dissolve the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority (AVA) and split its functions between the National Parks Board (NParks) and a new statutory board to oversee food safety and security.

The AVA will cease in April and its plant- and animal-related functions, including animal welfare, will be transferred to NParks.

The Singapore Food Agency will be formed on April 1 and take over the food-related functions of the AVA, the National Environment Agency and the Health Sciences Authority. The new agency, to come under the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources, is aimed at boosting food safety standards for consumers and strengthening local food businesses.

Four agencies and some 1,150 staff are involved in the reorganisation, which was first announced in July last year. The Bills to effect the process were introduced in Parliament yesterday by Senior Minister of State for the Environment and

Water Resources Amy Khor and Senior Parliamentary Secretary for National Development Sun Xueling.

Under the changes, NParks will become the lead agency for animal and wildlife management. Its new roles will include regulating veterinary establishments and practitioners as well as the trade in endangered species of animals and plants.

The Ministry of National Development said in response to queries that the operational details for the new import requirements, including the food items that will come under them, are being worked out and importers will be engaged in due course.

>90%
Singapore imports this proportion of its food.

Singapore imports food from about 180 countries as part of its diversification strategy and also aims to raise local food production, said a spokesman.

Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing said on Monday that the

local retail price of eggs increased by about 4 per cent between June and November last year, in part because of significant price increases from some of Singapore's import sources.

About 73 per cent of eggs consumed in Singapore are imported, with Malaysian farms forming a key source of supplies.

Malaysia said last month that it was looking into limiting or stopping the export of eggs to ensure a sufficient supply for the domestic market.

Mr Elson Tan, manager of egg importer Lam Leng Trading, said importers have been growing the diversity of their sources over the years, with the AVA organising overseas food-sourcing trips and helping to match importers with suppliers in Thailand, for example.

Mr Tan, who assists his father in chairing the Eggs Import/Export Trading Association, said: "Malaysia still makes up the majority, but we are not too reliant on one source. There are other countries like Australia and New Zealand."

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NCMP Dennis Tan proposes additional factors to fare formula

Toh Ting Wei

Service quality should be included in the public transport fare formula to improve commuters' experience, said Non-Constituency MP Dennis Tan yesterday.

This could be measured by an independent body like the Institute of Service Excellence, said the Workers' Party NCMP, who gave this suggestion and four others in an adjournment motion on putting commuters first in public transport.

Such independently derived scores can be directly factored into the fare formula, with positive com-

muter experiences rewarded and stagnant or negative commuter experience taken as a factor against fare hikes, he said.

He noted that service quality should not be the only or predominant factor in determining fares.

Another suggestion was to include profits made by transport operators as a factor in the fare formula. Mr Tan pointed to MTR Corp, which he said has a "productivity" factor that is derived by dividing revenue from its Hong Kong transport operations by expenses.

Hong Kong's experience can offer insights into how Singapore can go about tweaking our Fare Regula-

tion Framework to account for newly proposed factors," he said.

He also called for transport operators to put in a larger share of their profits into various public transport funds, and for the Government to find ways to give commuters timely and accurate information about matters such as train breakdowns.

Welcoming plans to renew the North East Line starting this year, Mr Tan urged the Government to commit to major renewals of rail assets at every 15-year milestone.

There is still work to do in improving the public transport system, he said, adding: "We should refrain from patting ourselves on the back

on our current progress."

Responding, Senior Minister of State for Transport Janil Puthucheary said the suggestions were worth exploring, without delving into each proposal.

He then set out what the Government is doing in terms of regulating the transport operators, improving reliability and service quality, making the transport system more accessible and keeping it affordable.

It is reasonable to consider new mechanisms to ensure Singapore's public transport system continues to move in the right direction, Dr Janil said.

"But if we're already doing some of these things or many of these things, we should refine them, get them right, tweak them, make them better. But I think we have to start on the premise that things are improving, things are going well, the mechanisms are working."

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Mr Dennis Tan called for service quality and profits made by transport operators to be included as factors in the public transport fare formula. He also urged the Government to commit to major renewals of rail assets at every 15-year milestone.

ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHOOONG

Checkpoint snarls not major source of disruption for firms

Linette Lai

While traffic snarls at the Causeway may affect deliveries, the Government has not received feedback that these jams are a major source of disruption for local companies.

Addressing Parliament yesterday, Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing said that if there are significant disruptions to supply chains by land, businesses will use alternative routes such as sea or air freight, or reserve stocks for essential supplies, or do both.

"While the jams may affect the schedule or timeliness of deliveries, we have not received feedback that they constitute a major source of business disruption for our companies recently," Mr Chan said in his reply to Non-Constituency MP Leon Perera. Mr Perera had asked about the impact of Causeway jams and what the Government will do to reduce their extent and impact.

During the festive period last month, some commuters reported they were stuck in jams that lasted four to six hours at both the Tuas and Woodlands checkpoints. It led Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam to say immigration officers were doing their best to cope with the increased travel volumes amid a manpower shortage.

Mr Chan noted that many companies schedule deliveries to avoid peak periods, or factor in extra travel time as a buffer against delays from such seasonal factors. He also pointed out that the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) releases notices regularly to help motorists anticipate such jams.

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Mr Chan noted that many companies schedule deliveries to avoid peak periods, or factor in extra travel time as a buffer against delays from such seasonal factors. He also pointed out that the ICA releases notices regularly to help motorists anticipate such jams.

900 flat buyers cancelled BTO bookings in 2018

Lawrence Wong: Such flats to be sold in sale-of-balance exercises

Aw Cheng Wei

About 900 flat buyers cancelled their Build-To-Order (BTO) bookings with the Housing Board last year because they could no longer afford the unit, changed their minds about moving or had bought a resale flat.

Of the cancelled bookings, 38 per cent were for four-room flats, 25 per cent for two-room flexi or similar units, and 22 per cent for five-room flats. The remaining 15 per cent were for three-room homes.

National Development Minister Lawrence Wong gave these figures in Parliament yesterday when replying to Mr Ang Wei Neng (Jurong GRC).

Mr Wong also said those who can-

cel their bookings before signing the lease agreement will forfeit the booking fee, which ranges from \$500 to \$2,000, depending on the flat type. Those who cancel after signing the lease agreement forfeit 5 per cent of the flat price, he added. "They would also need to wait a year before they may apply for another subsidised flat."

He explained that the measures are to make sure buyers are serious about buying a flat, and that they "do not deprive others who are in urgent need of buying a flat".

On a case-by-case basis, HDB has waived the forfeiture when buyers cancelled on valid grounds, he said.

Flats given up by prospective buyers will be sold in the sale-of-balance exercises, Mr Wong said in his reply to Mr Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten).

Ms Denise Phua (Jalan Besar GRC) asked about the help HDB home owners can receive when they face difficulties in selling their



Of the cancelled bookings, 38 per cent were for four-room flats, 25 per cent for two-room flexi or similar units, and 22 per cent for five-room flats. The remaining 15 per cent were for three-room homes.

flats because of the Ethnic Integration Policy. Mr Wong said that "very often, we find that by giving more time to complete the transaction of the new flat and to sell the existing flat they are able to proceed".

Those who still face difficulties after the extension should approach HDB for help, he added.

Replies to a separate question filed by Mr Faisal Manap (Aljunied GRC), Mr Wong said the land cost for HDB home projects awarded in 2016 and 2017 was about 60 per cent of total development cost.

The proportion was about the

same for three-room, four-room and five-room BTO flats, he added.

Other costs include construction, consultancy fees and financing. Proportions vary among projects, depending on various factors, including design and market, he added.

"In general, HDB's total development cost cannot be fully covered from the sale price of flats," said Mr Wong. "This is because the pricing of new HDB flats is guided by our objective of keeping public housing affordable."

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Those who cancel their bookings before signing the lease agreement will forfeit the booking fee, which ranges from \$500 to \$2,000, depending on the flat type, said National Development Minister Lawrence Wong. Those who cancel after signing the lease agreement forfeit 5 per cent of the flat price, he added.

ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

CPF Life payouts: Minimum age for withdrawal stays at 65

Joanna Seow
Manpower Correspondent

The minimum age to receive monthly payouts from Central Provident Fund (CPF) savings will not be lowered for now as it was raised to 65 only last year, Manpower Minister Josephine Teo said yesterday.

Employees appear to be more concerned about being able to work longer and save more, she told Parliament, which is why her prior-

ity this year is to build a new consensus between workers, employers and the Government on the retirement and re-employment ages.

She was replying to Ms Lee Bee Wah (Nee Soon GRC), who said retirees have approached her asking for an earlier CPF payout, as they lack money but are healthy and cannot appeal on medical grounds.

In fact, said Mrs Teo, more than half of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries, which are devel-

oped nations, have set their pension withdrawal age at 65 or older.

Some are raising it in the light of increasing longevity, she added.

For example, The Netherlands, Denmark and Germany are raising their respective pension withdrawal ages gradually to reach 67 by 2021, 2022 and 2029.

"So against such a backdrop, we must really ask if it is wise to lower our own PEA (payout eligibility age)," Mrs Teo said, referring to the minimum age at which CPF mem-

bers can start receiving their monthly CPF Life payouts.

However, permanently incapacitated or terminally ill CPF members, for example, can apply to withdraw their savings or start their payouts before age 65 under the Medical Grounds Scheme. Most applications - about 65 per cent - in the past three years were successful.

Mrs Teo also disclosed the payout eligibility age was not a major concern for workers during feedback sessions held by the Tripartite Workgroup on Older Workers.

The group, of which she is an adviser, began its review of the retirement and re-employment ages, plus the impact of CPF contribution rates on retirement adequacy, last year.

She has since met union leaders from industry clusters such as aerospace, logistics, healthcare, finan-

cial services and the public sector.

The feedback from the sessions and focus group discussions with people was that workers want the opportunity to work longer and save more.

"I want to be able to help make it happen (for these workers). At the same time, employers have also expressed their concerns to me. They have worries about their increased obligations," she said, adding that their considerations should not be taken lightly and dismissed.

This is why it is important to find common ground and consensus on the retirement age, which is 62, and the re-employment age, which is up to 67, she said.

"The new tripartite consensus is an important one and is the top-most of my priorities this year."

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Younger autonomous universities, such as the Singapore University of Technology and Design (above), Singapore Institute of Technology and Singapore University of Social Sciences, receive twice as much funding from the Government as their older counterparts, said Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Education Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

Newer universities get double government funding

Amelia Teng
Education Correspondent

The younger autonomous universities (AUs) receive twice as much funding from the Government as their older counterparts, said Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Education Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim.

He told the House yesterday that the Government gives newer institutions, namely the Singapore University of Technology and Design, Singapore Institute of Technology,

and Singapore University of Social Sciences, a grant of three times the amount of donations they get.

This is on top of "sizeable seed monies to start up their endowment fund", he said.

Since 2010, the other three universities - the National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University and Singapore Management University - have received a government grant of 1½ times the amount they raise.

This is an increase from previous dollar-for-dollar matching grants,

which the Government started in 1991 to encourage donations to tertiary education, said Dr Faishal.

He was responding to Nominated MP Walter Theseira, who asked if the larger endowment funds held by the more established universities result in differences in educational resources for students.

Associate Professor Theseira also asked if the Ministry of Education (MOE) would consider measures to help the newer institutions build their endowments to provide students and faculty with comparable

resources, as well as ensure that differences in endowments do not affect the quality of education and research across the universities.

Dr Faishal said: "The sizes of endowment funds across the AUs differ today. They depend on the ability of AUs to raise donations, investment returns and, of course, how long the AU has been in existence."

Government funding continues to be the main source of funding for university education, he noted.

He added that Singaporean stu-

75 per cent of costs, regardless of which autonomous university they are enrolled in.

There is also an array of funding initiatives from MOE and other government agencies that the universities can tap to support projects and research, he said.

"The Government will continue to support every AU - both financially and otherwise - to provide the best education experience for their students."

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521 firms with unfair practices warned or sanctioned

A total of 521 companies with unfair employment practices were warned or sanctioned by the Manpower Ministry (MOM) from 2013 to 2017.

Of these, 58 per cent received warnings, while 42 per cent faced more difficulty when applying for foreign work passes.

"So you can see that there is action being taken, and certainly we have to be fair to both employees and employers to make sure that the cases are dealt with fairly," said Minister of State for Manpower Zaqy Mohamad in Parliament yesterday.

He was replying to Nominated MP Walter Theseira, who asked whether the ministry could publicly name errant employers to assure people that action is being taken.

The ministry and the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (Tafep) have publicised cases in situations of public interest or where the conduct is egregious, Mr Zaqy said.

"However, while naming all errant employers publicly would serve as a deterrence, there could be unintended consequences because we may end up indirectly identifying the affected employees or breaching their privacy," he said.

Tafep also develops case studies from actual cases and shares learning points with employers through briefings and workshops, he added.

It publishes the numbers and main types of complaints it receives in its annual reports.

MOM and Tafep received an average of 450 complaints a year about unfair employment practices from 2015 to 2017, Mr Zaqy said.

Most were about favouritism towards foreigners or discrimination based on age, he said.

When Tafep investigates complaints, employers are generally cooperative. But those who are uncooperative or found to have unfair employment practices may have their work-pass privileges curtailed, he said.

Most of the complaints arise because employers do not have a proper system to address internal grievances or are insensitive to the different needs and conditions of employees, Mr Zaqy also said. The aim is to help these employers improve their internal practices or resolve the complaints amicably.

Mr Patrick Tay (West Coast GRC) suggested publicising the industries and sizes of companies involved in complaints. Mr Zaqy said the MOM would consider doing so.

Joanna Seow



Ms Sheena Kanwar, Home's executive director, talking with participants at an event yesterday to launch the report by the group and Hong Kong-based anti-trafficking group Liberty Shared on forced labour in Singapore's domestic work sector. ST PHOTO: JASMINE CHONG

Report suggests maids at risk of forced labour

Manpower Ministry disputes finding by rights groups, says report doesn't accurately reflect working conditions

Seow Bei Yi

Domestic workers who seek help over their work conditions mostly do so for reasons such as over-work, verbal abuse and salary issues – and many of their complaints appear to be “strong indicators of forced labour”, a new report released yesterday said.

The report by the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) and Hong Kong-based anti-trafficking group Liberty Shared looks at forced labour in Singapore's domestic work sector. Forced labour is work or services ex-

acted from a person “under the menace of any penalty and for which (he) has not offered himself voluntarily”, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Responding to the report, a Manpower Ministry (MOM) spokesman said it “does not accurately reflect the employment and working conditions of foreign domestic workers (FDWs) here. It said forced labour is a complex issue. “Meeting one or more of the ILO forced labour indicators may not necessarily mean that a worker is indeed in a forced labour situation.”

The ministry added that Singapore's Prevention of Human Traf-

ficking Act is aligned with the United Nations' Trafficking in Persons Protocol, that the Republic ratified in 2016.

The report said based on case-work data from Home, out of 2,832 complaints it received from April 2017 to March last year, 483 were related to overwork. In this period, it saw an average of 17 new runaways and, in the past year, it provided shelter to over 800 FDWs. There were around 250,000 FDWs in Singapore as of June last year.

“It is not uncommon for domestic workers to report working hours that range from 16 to 18 hours a day... with the (FDW) also not having any rest days,” said the report. “As there is a live-in requirement for (FDWs), those who look after the elderly or young children may be on call 24/7.”

Surveillance cameras, which are “common” in homes, make it hard for workers to take breaks without express permission by employers, it added. Other issues include being asked to do tasks not traditionally viewed as domestic work, such as giving employers massages or working illegally in their business.

The second-most common complaint among FDWs was verbal abuse, of which there were 472 cases. These include threats and insults, as well as sexually-loaded insults such as being told: “You are no better than a prostitute.”

Pay issues were the next most common, at 342 reported grievances. These include unpaid or delayed salaries and deductions, including for employer obligations like medical expenses. Some employers “safekeep” FDWs’ pay too.

Recent policy changes deal with a part of this, with MOM introducing a new Work Permit condition from this year that disallows employers from “safekeeping” money. The report also flagged conditions that leave FDWs vulnerable.

“The lack of guaranteed minimum wage, exclusion from the Employment Act, along with the non-mandatory employment contract and insufficient guidelines on working conditions... leave (them) vulnerable to different forms... of labour exploitation and abuse,” said Ms Sheena Kanwar, executive director of Home, and Ms Archana Kotecha, Asia director for Liberty Shared. While “anti-trafficking legislation exists, this is in no way a substitute for fundamental labour protections”, they said.

MOM, in its reply, said FDWs are generally happy working in Singapore, and the claim that they lack legal protections here “cannot be further away from the truth”.

It said although FDWs are not covered under the Employment Act as stipulations such as fixed work hours cannot be simply applied in a home environment, they are covered under the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act.

This law requires employers to provide adequate rest, proper accommodation and medical care, among others, to FDWs, although Home contends that this is “ambiguous language”.

The ministry also said a “very small number” of FDWs run away from employers, with the majority of cases due to misunderstandings. Abuses are an “even smaller minority”, it added.

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\$40,000 in salary withheld from maid

Foreign domestic worker Indah (not her real name) worked for her employer for nearly 10 years – during which more than \$40,000 of her salary was withheld from her.

Her employer said Ms Indah was not allowed to hold on to any money, kept her passport and Work Permit, and gave her no rest days as well.

Not only were Ms Indah’s appeals for home leave rejected by the same employer, but she also could not own a mobile phone and could not speak with her family for almost seven years.

Ms Indah’s case is one of many examples of forced labour highlighted in a joint report released yesterday by the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (Home) and the Hong Kong-based group Liberty Shared.

Forced labour, as defined by the International Labour Organisation, refers to all work or service exacted from a person “under the menace of any penalty and for which (he/she) has not offered himself voluntarily”.

Apart from working from 7am to 11pm daily and not being allowed to speak to strangers like other domestic workers in the neighbourhood, Ms Indah was never shown or given a copy of her employment contract.

Her salary was only \$280 when she first arrived in Singapore. She sought help from Home eventually, and her employer paid her outstanding wages after an MOM mediation, though Home noted they were not publicly penalised. “It was deemed by MOM that the matter was successfully resolved once Indah’s wages were received,” said the report.

Seow Bei Yi

More protections suggested

- Extend Employment Act to migrant domestic workers so they have regulated working hours, sick leave and limits on overtime, among other rights.
- Amend the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act to clearly define “forced labour” and “exploitation”, so cases are investigated in line with international standards.
- Allow foreign domestic workers to switch employers freely with clear notice periods. Currently, such workers are reliant on their employers’ consent to do so.
- Reform and abolish the \$5,000 security bond conditions so there is no “undue financial burden on employers” to ensure they control and supervise their foreign employee.
- Shift to a zero recruitment fee model so that domestic workers do not end up paying large sums for overseas placements, in the form of salary deductions, leaving them dependent and in debt.

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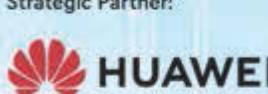
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SingPost says sorry for service failures in year-end peak season

Ng Huiwen

SingPost has apologised to customers for its recent service failures, which it said were due to a “tremendously busy” peak season in November and December that was “beyond forecasts”.

Due to an increase in the volume of packages, its postmen had to make an extra 20 doorstep deliveries on average daily, as well as work beyond their usual hours, SingPost said in a Facebook post on Monday.

“We hired extra resources, recalled personnel and activated teams from the corporate office on Saturdays just to meet the demand, but our service quality still suffered as a result,” it said.

Social media users have in recent weeks been vocal about what they claimed was poor delivery service by SingPost.

Facebook user Andy Lau, whose Dec 26 post went viral, said a delivery man left a note on his doorstep and ran off after knocking on his door for a few seconds.

Mr Lau added that he confronted the delivery man, who seemed unable to explain his actions.

His post led to other social media users sharing similar experiences.

SingPost, in its Facebook posting, said that, being part of the service industry, it is dependent on front-line staff to provide the best experiences for customers, though “inevitably, there will be employees who may not act in the best interests of the company”.

It added: “We have experienced service failures due to the individual actions of a few employees. We are aware that this not only reflects badly on our organisation, but also undermines the hard work, commitment and dedication that the

majority of our postal staff are displaying every single day.

“Such behaviour will not be tolerated.”

In apologising to customers, SingPost also said it is taking a serious look at the issues that have surfaced in recent weeks and will find ways to improve immediately.

The company processes an average of three million mail items daily.

“We assure you that we will be vigorous in reviewing and revising our operational procedures, so that you will receive your letters, packages and parcels without delay, without hassle and, most importantly, without frustration,” SingPost added.

Some netizens are still unhappy despite the apology, leaving complaints on SingPost’s Facebook page.

Facebook user Jesse Cheong, for example, claimed that a postman had forged her signature on a delivery notice a while ago and left the item in her letterbox without her knowledge.

But there are also netizens who are sympathetic. Facebook user Selina Wee said: “It’s tough on SingPost when there are so many online purchases nowadays. Be more understanding.”

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MOM halts facade cleaning works at Republic Plaza

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has suspended all cleaning works for the facade of Republic Plaza in Raffles Place after four workers were spotted swinging precariously on a gondola last Wednesday.

An MOM statement yesterday also said the ministry is investigating the incident.

A spokesman for Republic Plaza’s building management told The Straits Times yesterday that four workers from its appointed cleaning contractor were on a gondola when “unexpected strong winds” caused it to sway while ascending from level 50 to the rooftop.

“Due to weather conditions, this can occur from time to time,” said

the spokesman. Once the management was notified of the situation, the external cleaning works were stopped as the “workers’ safety is our top priority”, he added.

The gondola had been certified safe to operate and the workers were trained and certified to perform facade cleaning at height. The workers on the gondola also had personal protective equipment, he said. No one was injured.

The contractor has been doing regular facade cleaning at the 66-storey Republic Plaza since the early 2000s, said the spokesman.

The building management is working with MOM to look into the matter and explore ways to further

minimise swaying of the gondola due to unexpected changes in weather conditions.

Witnesses told citizen journalism website Stomp on Monday that four men were standing on the gondola 58 storeys high at about 2.30pm, when it slammed into a glass window a few times.

Videos show the workers repeatedly looking upwards at the gondola sways. They are also seen holding onto the sides of the gondola and trying to stabilise themselves. As the gondola nears the window, one of the workers is seen pushing his hand against the facade. The men appear to have cleaning equipment with them.

A witness, who gave her name only as April, said: “These brave men mustered a smile despite being clearly petrified each time the gondola slammed into the building... It was scary watching this.”

Ng Huiwen

Czech PM wants to reopen embassy here

Embassy will help promote ties, he says, while noting Singapore's importance as regional trade hub

Rebecca Lynne Tan

One of the first things on the agenda for Czech Republic Prime Minister Andrej Babis when he returns home after his first official trip to Singapore, and to Asia, will be to reopen its embassy here.

"To help and promote relations, I have decided to reopen the embassy," Mr Babis said, noting Singapore's importance as a hub for trade and finance in the region.

He told The Straits Times yesterday: "I don't understand why we don't have an embassy here... but we have to reopen it."

The Czech Republic Embassy here was closed in 2008. Since then, the country's ambassador to Indonesia has been responsible for matters with Singapore.

Yesterday, the second day of his two-day trip, Mr Babis visited the Singapore Botanic Gardens, where an orchid was named in his honour.

He also delivered a keynote speech at the fourth Singapore-Czech Republic Business Forum held at The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore.

Present at the forum were Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Senior Minister of State for Trade and Industry and Education Chee Hong Tat, who also spoke.

Mr Babis, who also met Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat, described their meeting as "fantastic" and "educational". They spoke "very concretely about debt, assets and so on", he said.

He added that he is happy that he and Mr Heng share a similar opinion on economic strategy.

On Monday, Mr Babis called on President Halimah Yacob and Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, who hosted him to an official dinner.

When asked if his country, which has been part of the European Union since 2004, would join the euro zone - the bloc of EU member countries that have adopted the euro as their currency - he was



quick to respond with a "no".

"No. If I am in government, definitely not," he said.

On maintaining an independent currency, he said: "We are very much an export-oriented country. If we were to enter the euro zone, then of course, we will be in the club with countries which don't perform very well - they are not very much responsible for the budget, they have a high debt..."

"It is also a question (of whether) to be independent. I know we have some obligation to enter the euro zone but the euro zone will need to reform because there are some countries which have high debt..."

Another item on Mr Babis' list is to establish a direct airline connection between Prague and Singapore to better facilitate economic relations and promote tourism.

The Czech Republic is Singapore's 14th largest trading partner in the EU. Bilateral trade stood at \$1.15 billion in 2017, with imports amounting to \$486.5 million and exports worth \$660.2 million.

In 2005, trade between Singapore and the Czech Republic amounted to \$300 million.

Mr Babis also visited Nanyang Technological University's Centre of Excellence for Testing & Research of Autonomous Vehicles.

The university signed a memorandum of understanding with the University of Chemistry and Technology, Prague, on a partnership for research in energy storage and future mobility solutions.

Mr Babis heads to Thailand and India after Singapore.

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Left: Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Czech Republic Prime Minister Andrej Babis arriving at The Ritz-Carlton, Millenia Singapore, for the fourth Singapore-Czech Republic Business Forum yesterday.
ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO

Below: Mr Babis, flanked by Mr Chee Hong Tat (left) and Dr Leong Chee Chiew (NParks' deputy CEO), had an orchid named after him at the Singapore Botanic Gardens. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO



The owner of the flat enclosed the area surrounding the steps up to his ground-floor unit to form a glass tank housing around a dozen pet fish. HDB says the tank's position poses safety concerns.
PHOTO: SHIN MIN DAILY NEWS



Thanks, but no tanks: HDB orders removal of unusual fish tank

Toh Ting Wei and Derek Wong

A Housing Board flat owner who converted the doorstep of his property into a fish tank for his koi fish has been asked to remove the unusual structure.

The Tampines Street 41 resident had enclosed the area surrounding the steps up to his ground-floor unit to form a glass tank housing around a dozen pet fish, but was not aware that he needed permission to make the alteration.

Belatedly, the man asked the

Tampines Town Council for a permit, and last August, Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng told The Straits Times that the "creative" tank was likely to be allowed, as long as it was found to be structurally sound and safe.

However, HDB said yesterday that the tank would have to be removed, as its position - along a common corridor - poses safety concerns that "could potentially lead to injuries or fatalities".

A spokesman said: "The flat owner has fundamentally altered the entrance steps into a koi tank, which poses several safety issues.

"For instance, the koi tank is made of glass and can shatter on impact. As it is also not enclosed at the top, unsupervised children may climb or fall into the tank."

Electrical sockets and cables connected to the tank are exposed to weather elements, posing further safety concerns, HDB said.

It added that its guiding principle for town councils in managing the use of public spaces is that safety must not be compromised.

The flat's fish-loving residents also own the adjacent flat, through which they enter the unit with the blocked-off doorway.

Last August, neighbours told The Straits Times that the tank was installed around three years earlier, and one resident described it as "unique and nice".

When ST visited the unit last night, the owner, who declined to give his name, was adamant that the space was his private landing and that he should be allowed to keep the tank.

"It doesn't cause any obstruction to people and the laws should be ap-

plied on a case-by-case basis," he said. "If I go to any other unit, I will also find laws broken, such as plants on the stairs."

He said the tank has helped bring the community together, with visitors coming from as far as Jurong and Bukit Batok to view it.

"If I start a petition (to keep the tank), I think people will surely sign it," the owner added.

He had kept koi in normal tanks in the past, but as they grew bigger, he decided to build the tank on the steps. A contractor friend helped him to build it about two to three years ago.

To strengthen the tank, he subsequently used a metal bracket to line its edge. The tank contains more than 50 litres of water and about eight or nine Japanese koi, or carp.

He does not keep any fish in the flat itself, preferring to have them outdoors. He said: "The sun helps the koi develop brighter colours."

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company had offered an apology to the customer.
She said: "This appears to be an isolated incident as checks on existing stocks did not reveal any anomalies and we have not received any similar feedback recently concerning the product."

"FairPrice is committed to upholding a high level of food safety standards and the farmed salmon products we offer comply with internationally recognised food regulations and standards."

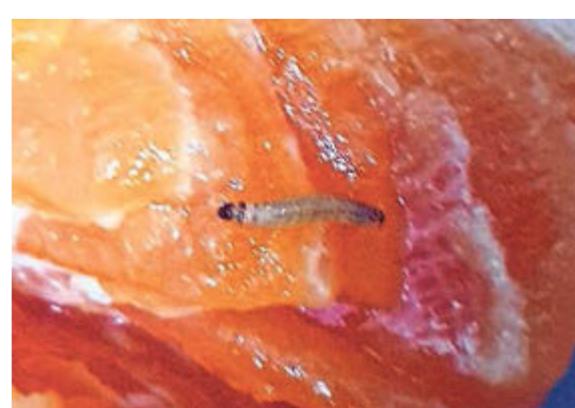
Customers who find the quality of its fresh produce unsatisfactory can return the product to the same store with their receipt for a full refund or exchange, she said.

gyanhan@sph.com.sg

ONE-OFF CASE

This appears to be an isolated incident as checks on existing stocks did not reveal any anomalies.

FAIRPRICE SPOKESMAN



An entomologist found that the insect is the larva of a moth or butterfly, and feeds on fruit and vegetables.
PHOTO: LIANHE WANBAO READER

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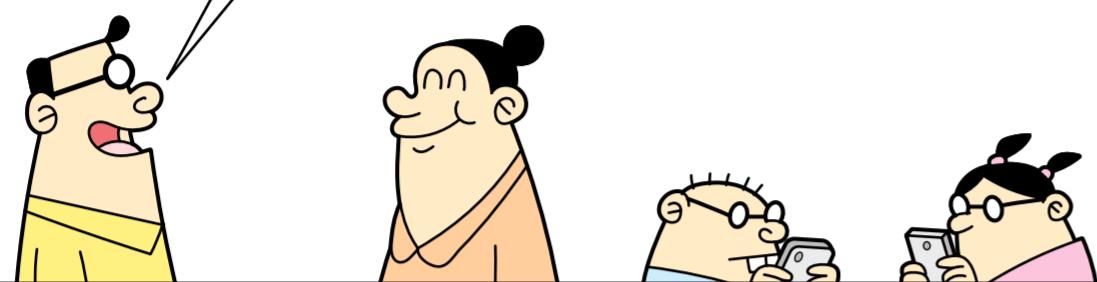
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FORUM

gleeklaw's TAKE

New notes for Chinese New Year available
at 42 pop-up ATMs islandwide

Good news, dear: I managed to get new notes to put in our red packets.



Bad news: All \$2 and \$10 bills were taken. Only the \$50 ones are left.



Why are SP Group's rates higher than retailers'?

I appreciate the Energy Market Authority's (EMA) response (Open electricity market gives consumers choice; Jan 14) to Mr Hoe Lye Soon's concerns regarding the Open Electricity Market (OEM) (Keep buying of electricity simple; Jan 5).

I acknowledge that it is always good for consumers to have more choices.

However, I have a seemingly simple question that has yet to receive a satisfactory answer from the electricity retailers I have asked.

Given that electricity retailers are looking to make a profit, have spent a significant amount on marketing costs and are still able to offer consumers electricity rates that are a good 20 to 30 per cent lower than SP Group's, why doesn't SP Group just offer consumers these lower rates in the first place?

Many of the 13 or so retailers participating in the OEM do not generate their own power, instead claiming to buy in bulk from power plants to sell to consumers.

As the largest bulk buyer of electricity, SP Group should benefit

the most from economies of scale, and be able to pass the savings on to consumers.

It is hard to understand the logic behind creating the OEM and getting so many retailers to compete for consumers, when SP Group is in a position to bypass this step to sell electricity directly to consumers at more competitive rates.

I doubt I am the only consumer puzzled by this, and hope that EMA can give a satisfactory explanation.

Albert Tang

Keep calm and carry on negotiating

I found myself shouting "bravo" on reading Mr Cheng Shoong Tat's letter (Time S'pore responded like-for-like to Malaysia; Jan 15).

It was a primal reflexive response, soon to be tempered after carefully reading Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan's report to Parliament (S'pore to discuss issues with KL calmly, but will guard its turf: Vivian; Jan 15).

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth simply signifies revenge and retribution. The adoption of such a mediaeval mindset strategy involves no diplomatic effort.

Singapore has the ample military wherewithal to repel any incursion into our territory but such a sanguinary approach backing any confrontation can only be adopted

after all other avenues have been exhausted.

In this context, that means bilateral consultations in good faith, third-party refereeing or adjudication by internationally-sanctified bodies.

Provocation met by dignified responses and bilaterally satisfactory settlement without use of force are the sine qua non of good diplomacy which, traditionally, is our forte.

We should always negotiate with the comity of nations in mind, even while wielding a big stick.

Nobody really wins big when countries endeavour to give each other a bloody nose in a tit-for-tat manner.

The new Malaysian government,

even as led by a veteran prime minister who has always displayed antipathy towards Singapore, has multifactorial problems it must resolve urgently if it wants to stay in power.

Playing the Singapore bogeyman card will not be the first nor last time it will use it as a gambit in an effort to detract attention from its pressing plethora of predicaments.

Keeping this new fracas low-key without amplification, while steadfastly maintaining decorum, will thwart any effort to make us an effective pawn to Malaysian politics.

Confrontation and jingoism is going to be the least productive strategy.

Yik Keng Yeong (Dr)

Military action not our only 'big stick'

In the current sea and air territorial spat with our neighbour, Mr Cheng Shoong Tat recommended tit-for-tat action (Time S'pore responded like-for-like to Malaysia; Jan 15).

Every true Singaporean will be tempted to fan the flames of retaliation and raise the drum beats of conflict, and I am sure many will be on his side.

However, the Government advocates all to keep calm, stay united and resilient.

In other words, do not aggravate

the situation. Our MPs are also very anxious about how to advise their constituents.

Should we limit ourselves to reacting in only these two ways?

Theodore Roosevelt was a wise and popular US president, and oft-quoted for his foreign policy methods.

He had one called "big stick" diplomacy".

His policy was to "speak softly and carry a big stick". He used carefully-crafted negotiations with the unspoken threat of American

military might.

Singapore's "big stick" need not be military.

It could be economic, social or related to other matters of national development expertise, not forgetting our strong defence cohesiveness, our mighty reserves and honest upright standing in the world.

Furthermore, as long as our cause in the dispute can stand up favourably in international mediation, we have nothing to fear.

Wong Beech Huan

WRITE IN: Letters should be meant for exclusive publication in The Straits Times. They should be no longer than 400 words and must include the writer's full name, address and phone numbers. The Forum editor reserves the right to edit the letters. For women, please indicate Miss, Ms, Mrs or Madam. Please e-mail your letter to stforum@sph.com.sg. Readers can also respond to letters via Facebook and Twitter.

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Irony of building 'forest town' after clearing forests

I am puzzled that the HDB has chosen not to release the full report from the study it commissioned on the impact of the planned public housing in Tengah, given that it would allay the fears and concerns of the public, especially those of us who care for the survival of flora and fauna in Singapore (Dispute over key findings of Tengah environmental study; Jan 12).

It is ironic that the project is called "forest town" when it would, in fact, result in the clearing of hundreds of hectares of forests which connect the Western Catchment with the Central Catchment Nature Reserve.

This is critical in ensuring that endangered species such as the pangolin and the hawk-eagle have a chance at survival.

HDB's building of a proposed "forest corridor" will not accomplish the same purpose.

Is HDB so short of land that it must clear this last vestige of Singapore's forests?

How can future residents feel proud to live in this "forest town", knowing that precious flora and fauna were displaced and possibly pushed to extinction due to this project?

Surely HDB has other options such as the clearing of older estates

and building taller apartment blocks.

It is time for HDB to stop giving lip service to environmental issues, and work closely with ecologists and nature groups.

We are sending the wrong signal to future generations when we give little regard to our forests while teaching them to respect nature and the environment.

I appeal to HDB to seriously consider the long-term effects of its decision.

Let us build a city that we can all be proud of, which need not be at the expense of our fragile forests.

Sreedharan Suresh

Consultants doing EIAs should report to the authorities

In recent years, a number of issues have arisen surrounding development in or around forests in Singapore, which may be cleared for that purpose.

The development is generally done after an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which is aimed at determining the

conservation and environmental value of a forest, how it may be affected by the particular development, and potential ways to mitigate these effects.

These EIAs are done by ostensibly independent consultants.

But while these consultants are

not part of the organisation that commissioned the EIA, they are paid by the client, report regularly to the client, and may be asked by the client to modify the final report before it is submitted to the relevant environmental authorities.

To ensure the actual independence of these consultants, perhaps they should instead report directly to the environmental authorities who review the final report.

Lahiru Wijedasa

Steps taken to ensure quality, affordable, student care

We thank Madam Joyce Anne Chia for her feedback (Improve after-school care centres; Jan 3).

We agree that student care centres (SCCs) are an important care option for working parents who need after-school care support for their school-going children.

There are more than 400 SCCs in schools and the community that are registered with the Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) to administer student care fee subsidies.

Where there is demand for school-based student care services, schools work closely with the service providers to expand their capacity.

Over 90 per cent of primary schools have an on-site SCC. The rest will establish one by the start of next year.

To ensure that student care is affordable for lower-income families, MSF provides monthly subsidies for student care fees and a one-off grant to offset enrolment costs.

With the assistance, eligible students could pay as low as \$5 per month.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) also ensures that school-based SCCs remain affordable, and provides financial assistance to lower-income Singapore citizen students in our schools.

MSF requires all registered SCCs to meet our standards in areas of supervision, physical environment, operating hours, safety, health and hygiene, and provide a structured daily programme.

Regular checks are made to ensure this.

Many SCCs offer a variety of programmes, including activities for enrichment and character development.

To strengthen staff capabilities,

MSF, the Education Ministry and Workforce Singapore have rolled out a Workforce Skills Qualifications-certified Student Care Course for SCC staff, which ensures that SCC staff are trained in areas such as child behaviour, child safety and health, and programme planning.

Our schools also provide regular feedback to their SCC service providers to ensure programmes are designed and well run, and staff are sufficiently skilled.

MSF and MOE will continue to review the quality, accessibility and affordability of student care.

Kong Kum Peck (Ms)
Director
ComCare and Social Support Division
Ministry of Social and Family Development

Liew Wei Li (Ms)
Director of Schools
Ministry of Education

Give those with autism chance to serve NS

Many autistic individuals are not given the opportunity to serve national service, even in non-combat vocations (NS vital as new threats emerge; President; Dec 16, 2018).

When they seek employment later in life, their exemption from NS raises red flags among potential employers and severely compromises their ability to secure employment.

Autistic individuals who possess suitable intellectual ability should be allowed to serve a modified version of NS.

Let them spend their first year at an employment boot camp, where they receive training on how to work with other people in various job and work settings.

This will focus on work attitudes, social skills and other issues hindering them from being meaningfully employed.

This training will allow them to then spend the second year serving in the SAF in a non-combat vocation.

There is much that people with autism can do to contribute to the nation. We should try to find a win-win solution that allows them to contribute while also reducing their future unemployment rate.

Dino Trakakis

Not easy to classify workers with single test

We refer to Ms Corinna Lim and Mr Heng Cho Choon's letters (Employee or independent contractor - law needs to be clear, Jan 4; and Not possible for law to be exact in classifying workers, Jan 8) on the legal test to distinguish between an employee and a self-employed person.

Whether a worker is an employee depends on the level of control that the company exercises over him.

As noted by Mr Heng, given the wide variety of work situations, no

single factor can be used.

Rather, a range of factors is used, such as whether:

- The company has the obligation to provide work for the worker
- The worker is obliged to accept work assigned by the company
- The individual is required to personally carry out the work
- The equipment and tools used to perform the work are provided by the company and
- The extent to which the worker needs to comply with the

company's procedures and prescribed method of work.

Whether the work is performed part- or full-time or that the contract itself states that the worker is an independent contractor is irrelevant.

This practice is not only consistent with that in other developed economies, but it also reduces the risk that some companies may alter their work arrangements to avoid employment obligations while

substantively still retaining control over the worker.

In most situations, individuals work for employers under a clear contract of service with no ambiguity about their employment status or rights.

Parties who are unclear about the nature of their contract, or rights and obligations, should seek clarification before accepting it.

They can also approach the Ministry of Manpower or the Tripartite Alliance for Dispute

Management for assistance.

We take stern action against employers who misclassify their employees as self-employed persons in order to avoid their statutory obligations, and have helped about 100 such employees in the last three years recover their statutory entitlements.

Then Yee Thoong
Divisional Director
Labour Relations and Workplaces Division
Ministry of Manpower



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Capturing life in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh were The Straits Times' associate editor Rahul Pathak (left), artist Pradip Kumar Sikdar (middle), and executive photojournalist Kua Chee Siong. The ST team spent nine days in the Rohingya camps in July 2018.



PICTURE THIS



ST PHOTO: STEVEN LEE

Fading fortunes

A long queue of people waiting to get into Yaohan Katong on the second day of its opening on Aug 28, 1977. The Japanese department store company opened at Plaza Singapura in 1974. In 1997, its parent company in Japan was declared insolvent.

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The National Chinese Challenge, co-organised by SPH Chinese Media Group, Nanyang Girls' High and proudly presented by ICBC Singapore Branch, will be held for the 6th time in 2019. If you are game to pit your Chinese abilities against your peers, remember to send in your application through your school by 15 March 2019 (Friday). This competition is open to students from Primary 5 to Secondary 5.

National Chinese Challenge 2019

Are you up for THE CHALLENGE?
Take part and stand a chance to win cash prizes and book vouchers

Preliminaries:
30 March (Saturday)
9am - 11am
ITE College Central

Semi-Finals & Finals:
17 April (Wednesday)
1pm - 5pm
Bugis+ Atrium, Level 2

Secondary School Category

- Champion: \$3,000 Cash & book vouchers with trophy
- 1st Runner-up: \$2,000 Cash & book vouchers with trophy
- 2nd Runner-up: \$1,000 Cash & book vouchers with trophy
- Semi-finalists: \$300 Cash & book vouchers

Primary School Category

- Champion: \$2,000 Cash & book vouchers with trophy
- 1st Runner-up: \$1,000 Cash & book vouchers with trophy
- 2nd Runner-up: \$500 Cash & book vouchers with trophy
- Merit Award: \$200 Cash & book vouchers with trophy

* Top 20 Primary scorers and top 30 Secondary scorers from the preliminary will each receive \$30 and \$50 respectively. All winners will receive a certificate of achievement.

Organisers: Co-presenter:

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